



VINCENT BOBBE

IMMORTALS'
REQUIEM

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AN ALTERNATIVE EARTH NOVEL



VINCENT BOBBE



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To Eve and Eddie.

You are my immortality.

Memento Mori

AUTHOR'S NOTE



DEAR READER. THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING MY BOOK!

If you enjoy *Immortals' Requiem* (and I sincerely hope that you do), then please don't miss out on your FREE additional content. The link is in the back matter before the **Glossary of Characters**, so please keep reading!

FONDEST REGARDS,

VINCENT BOBBE

PROLOGUE



Around 500 BC

They think I am the god of death. They beg you for deliverance.

‘There is none to be had here,’ the tattooed man said. ‘Get out of my head!’

‘As you wish,’ the giant replied in the True Tongue. Twilight had settled over the fire-blasted glade. The tattooed man stood beneath the skeletal remains of an oak tree at the edge of the ruined clearing. Behind the tattooed man, lush woodland stretched rich and verdant to the banks of a wide river. At his feet, thick black ash smouldered gently while veins of red charcoal slowly settled, occasionally venting wisps of smoke into air already thick with heat and ash.

At the giant’s feet knelt a man and a woman. Shock glazed their eyes and slackened their faces. Their legs had blistered and burned down to raw, blackened sticks. The stink of charred flesh came off them in waves. The man’s mouth twitched madly. The woman stared at the tattooed man with empty eyes. She called out. Her voice was weak and choked with pain and anguish.

The sound was bestial and ugly to the tattooed man. He did not understand the language of humans, nor did he care to. The kneeling man, old and weathered, echoed the woman, and the tattooed man shut them out.

The giant standing above them smiled. ‘You are not going to save them?’ he asked.

‘I care nothing for them or their kind.’

The giant smiled again. At eight feet tall, he was a spindly ogre. Despite his height, he appeared almost human: white skinned with lank black hair that fell to his shoulders and framed his narrow face. The tips of vaguely pointed ears eased out from his tangled mane, and weird eyes – hard crystal, ringed with black sclera – glittered above his nose.

His long fingers gently caressed the heads of the man and the woman kneeling at his feet. ‘There could be a Ring here – can you feel it? The potential?’ asked the giant.

‘It would not do you any good.’

‘Really?’ The giant gripped the hair of his captives and pulled their faces up so he could look down into them. ‘They are a fey race, these Brigantes, though there are not many of them. I have had to slaughter their entire village to gain enough power to escape you and your bitch mistress.’

‘There is nowhere you can run, Cú Roí,’ the tattooed man growled back.

Cú Roí did not appear to hear him. ‘This one here,’ he said, jerking the head of the man, ‘was their leader. He has a strange gift – he can see the future. The tales he has spun to me ... quite extraordinary. And this one,’ he said, pulling at the female, ‘is a healer. Sores, colds, breaks, sprains ... she lays her hands upon them and they fade away. Yes, a powerful race these Brigantes. With their sacrifice, I shall have enough magic to leave you behind.’

‘My life is tied to yours, Cú Roí. While you live, I live. Where you go, I go.’

‘Yes, that has been difficult these last few centuries. You are quite the zealot.’ He smiled without humour and the tattooed man saw rows of sharp, tiny teeth nestled in his gums. ‘It was this one who finally solved the problem for me.’ He dragged the man’s head higher. ‘Where can I go that you cannot follow? The answer is quite simple, once you think about it. The magic of your mistress is powerful, but what happens to you when I cease to exist?’

‘Then my purpose is complete, and I will die.’

‘Exactly,’ hissed the giant. Silence filled the clearing. Mercifully, the man and the woman had fainted. Their legs were unrecognisable; flesh and sinew were burned away by the red-hot ash. Only Cú Roí’s grip on their hair prevented

them from falling flat onto the searing ground.

‘Enough of this,’ said the tattooed man. Raising a huge hand above his right shoulder, he gripped the sigil-branded leather hilt of the sword that was slung across his back. He pulled it free in one smooth motion. The sword was called Camulus, and it had been crafted by the Maiden of Earth and Water, blessed by her and engraved with runes, which shimmered and skipped like rainbows in a tempest. It was a blade of power. It had been designed to destroy the towering laconic man at the centre of the devastation.

‘It is time to die,’ the tattooed man said.

‘That is a pretty toy you have there, zealot, but what exactly do you expect steel to do to me?’

‘Silver, monster. This is silver, blessed by both Courts, and etched with the words of your death.’

‘Ah, you have been paying attention. Fortunately, so have I.’ The disconcerting smile got broader.

The tattooed man stiffened. The skin between his shoulders itched and his hackles rose.

Something was watching him. Gripping the hilt of Camulus tighter, the tattooed man inhaled deeply. There it was. Beneath the stench of seared meat, burned wood, and acrid smoke he could smell putrescence and blood. The tattooed man spun around to face the forest. He scanned the tree line but could see nothing. They were there though, and he cursed himself for being led into an ambush so easily.

The voice of Cú Roí drifted to him from over his shoulder. ‘You are familiar with my Barghest?’

Branches swayed as two huge forms moved silently from the forest. Their squirming bodies shuddered with anticipation. Behind them came a slim man, his pale skin slick beneath the uncured furs that he was wrapped in. His head was too big for his body, and his eyes bulged out uncomfortably. He stared blankly at the tattooed man, never blinking, even in the smoke that choked the air. He held the Barghest on ropes.

‘This changes nothing, Cú Roí. These ... cubs ... cannot kill me.’

‘But they can hurt you, can they not? I give Leach there the word and they will tear you to pieces. I only regret there are not more, but as I said, I needed most of the humans for a different kind of sacrifice.’ The giant’s face twisted in sudden rage. His voice rose to a shout. ‘You used to worship me. You and the four races knelt at my feet in awe and wonder. I was the Miracle Child, and you have the temerity to hunt me?’

The tattooed man turned back to face Cú Roí. ‘You are an abomination that should never have been spawned, and my mistress never saw you as anything more than a dangerous curio. The blame for your continued existence can be laid at the feet of the Satyr of Fire and Air, and it is his mistake that I am here to rectify.’ He took a step towards the giant, the sword held ready.

The pale man named Leach let go of the ropes, and the Barghest swarmed in with hungry, reverberating roars. The tattooed man slipped smoothly out of their way, ignoring the pain of barbed tentacles sliding into his skin. The sword flashed, and pieces of coiling pink flesh fell to burn in the drifts of ash. His tattoos writhed, and sinuous painted blue bodies shifted to cover the wounds, leaving nothing but ink scale where before there were open wounds. The Barghest backed away cautiously, and the pale man in furs stared malignantly at him. The tattooed man held his ground.

‘They have learned a lesson,’ Cú Roí said, nodding towards the lurking Barghest. ‘It will stand them in good stead when I am gone.’ Then his hands slipped down and in one smooth motion, ripped open the throats of both humans.

Blood spurted into the air and onto the ground. Impossibly, the liquid did not steam away. Instead it twisted and flowed through channels until it met in a single pool just in front of Cú Roí. The surface was still and stygian. The corpses slipped to the ground in puffs of ash. The woman’s hair caught on fire.

Cú Roí stepped towards the pool. The tattooed man pulled back his arm and threw the sword with all his strength. It flew straight and true, point first towards the giant. Cú Roí’s left foot touched the surface of the pool and it held his weight. His right foot joined it, and he turned and smiled triumphantly at the tattooed man.

The smile slipped when the blade plunged into his stomach. Cú Roí raised

his head to scream, even as the puddle lost solidity. The giant's body dropped from sight, vanishing into the non-existent depths of the blood pool.

The tattooed man took a step towards it, but the magic had faded, and the blood was already soaking into the ash. The viscous substance boiled and steamed away in seconds. Cú Roí was gone.

Peace descended over the tattooed man. He looked up into the darkening sky. He could hear the Barghest, but he ignored them. Cú Roí was gone – he could feel it. The monster was dead. With that final realisation, his own death rushed down to engulf him.

By the time the Barghest reached him, his spirit was gone. The man called Leach watched the monsters' frenzy for a few seconds and then faded back into the forest.

The tattooed man's dead body was torn to shreds, his bones cracked and splintered, the marrow sucked into worm mouths, his flesh stripped and scattered. Then the Barghest sloped back into the forest, eager for fresh meat.

Neither Barghest saw the man with flashing eyes who stood and watched from the tree line, nor did they see the red-haired girl beside him, gazing sadly at what remained of the big man's tattooed corpse.

82 AD

THE SWOLLEN SUN WAS MAKING ITS LAZY DIP TOWARDS THE HORIZON, AND ITS golden face held a blush that coloured the world. Long grass swayed in a gentle summer breeze. Lazy white clouds bunched up in the dying light, their undersides washed with brilliant oranges and gentle reds. The early evening was warm and balmy. No sound came, except for exhausted birdsong and the whisper of grass rippling in steady waves beneath the caress of the soft breeze.

The empty green fields, dotted with bluebells and daisies and buttercups, stretched out in all directions. Clumps of daffodils shone burnished gold around

the occasional forlorn willow tree. The great Roman fort of Mamucium stood to the south. Its high limestone walls were grim and unadorned. The cold grey presence was a monument to the greatness of the expanding Roman Empire and the defeat of the Brigante tribes. In the distance to the east lay the emerald smudge of the great forest. The advancing Romans had chopped it back, eager for the raw materials that the woods held. The tree line began again beyond easy reach of the settlers, a wall of forbidding green and brown that squatted and stared back at the invaders with grim malevolence.

To the west and north, the grass gave way to the banks of a river that meandered through the rolling countryside with languid disinterest for the aspirations of men. Where the rapids ran, it twinkled bright and blue in the dying sun, whitecaps glittering with the flash of a smile. Elsewhere, the deep sluggish waters moved along, silent and black. On the far banks of the river lay more forest. Its thick canopy and tangled undergrowth turned the land within its borders from the ethereal twilight of evening to the grim blackness of night.

Between the fort and the river, closer to the muddy bank than to the squatting wall, was a ring of standing stones. There were sixteen boulders in a rough circle, and they were old. Some stooped at an angle, the earth beneath them having collapsed to send them crooked. All of them were covered in thick moss and lichen, which thrived on their granite surfaces. Beneath the vegetable matter it was still possible to see where runes had been carved, though the passing of time and the ravages of the weather had worn them to near invisibility.

The Brigante tribes and the Roman settlers alike treated the ancient and mysterious stones with quiet reverence and respect. The tribes whispered that they were a place of power – a Fairy-Ring, home of the old folk – and as such, not to be interfered with. The Romans saw them as a temple of sorts, and though the Druidic traditions of the area were being systematically destroyed, the invaders left it alone. Perhaps they felt its power. Perhaps, remembering the blood and fire of the last revolt, they simply did not want to antagonise the painted tribesmen who lived in the brooding forest only an hour's walk from their walls. Whatever the reason, the stones had remained untouched for hundreds of years.

There was a shout of outrage followed by raucous laughter. Three young men were halfway between the fort and the river. One had tripped and sprawled on the ground in a puddle of wine. Around him lay the shards of a smashed clay jug. He was a big man, in his mid-twenties, dressed in tan hunting clothes. His sandy hair was thinning despite his youth, and his face was round and jowly.

‘Galerius, you oaf!’ a second man crowed in delight. ‘Now you have no wine for our evening swim!’ He was tall and emaciated, with wide brown eyes and long hair, braided in the Brigante fashion. He was also wearing hunting clothes, though his were dark green.

‘Give me some of yours, Octavius,’ Galerius said from the ground.

Octavius laughed. ‘Not a chance, my friend. If you want more wine, you will have to return to the fort.’ He laughed again.

Galerius turned to face his final companion, a tall, wiry man of around the same age. ‘What about you, Marcus?’ he begged. ‘I can’t go all the way back to the fort. It’ll be dark by the time I reach the river.’ Marcus surveyed Galerius with disdain. His eyes were deep, dark and brooding, and his skin had a swarthy olive sheen to it. Like his eyes, his hair was black. The oiled locks were cut to a medium length that brushed his ears and fell onto his forehead in a wave. His nose was straight, and his stance was haughty and proud.

‘Get off the ground, Galerius. You’re supposed to be a Roman, even if you have been brought up in this forsaken wilderness.’ Marcus twisted his face up in disgust as he spoke to the prostrate man.

Galerius dutifully pulled himself to his feet. ‘What do you say, Marcus, can I share your wine?’

‘I’ll think about it if you show a little backbone.’ Marcus took a swig of wine from the jug he held casually in his right hand. ‘Lying there in the filth like a pig and begging like a tribesman; I swear you are barely Roman, Galerius.’

Galerius blinked nervously. ‘We haven’t all been as lucky as you, Marcus,’ he said quietly.

‘You call this lucky? Dragged from the colonnades of Rome to sit in some stinking wooden outpost? At least Eboracum has some comforts, but this awful place my father insisted on building is a privy.’ He wrinkled his nose in distaste

and took another drink of wine. Then he spat the liquid out onto the ground. 'Even the wine here tastes foul,' he announced before upturning the jug and pouring it out at Galerius' feet. The bigger man was wise enough to hold his tongue.

'Look around you: grass and mud. Even the river is small. And those awful forests – they aren't like the forests of home where a man can see. Look at them! Anything could be hiding in them!' Marcus shivered theatrically. 'I was not lucky to be dragged here after my father. Governor? Governor of what? He's spent years conquering this land, and it's nothing but filth and peasants.'

'There's Annaea,' Octavius said quietly.

Marcus's face immediately softened. 'Yes,' he replied simply.

'This time tomorrow you'll be a married man,' Galerius said and slapped Marcus on the back.

An infectious grin spread over the young nobleman's face. 'I will, won't I. Annaea is the one shining light in this mire. Once we are wed, my father has promised me estates in Rome. I will take her from here and show her a real civilisation. One as perfect and pure as Annaea deserves better. This time tomorrow, she will be my wife.'

'This time tomorrow, she will be on her back with her legs in the air,' Octavius said slyly.

Marcus's grin spread wider, though he tried to show outrage at his friend's words. 'You are talking about my bride,' he said and punched Octavius in the arm. Galerius laughed too, happy that Marcus's grim mood had evaporated.

'We are supposed to be swimming,' Marcus shouted. 'I shall race you!' Marcus began running towards the river. The standing stones were directly in his path.

'Wait,' Galerius called.

Marcus slowed to a halt and turned. 'What?' he demanded.

'You can't go through the stones.'

'Why not? I am the son of Gnaeus Julius Agricola. I can do as I please.'

'Not the stones; they're unlucky,' Galerius said as he caught up with Marcus.

Octavius followed. 'He's right, Marcus. Those stones are cursed. The

Brigante say they are the homes of their gods.’

‘Well, their gods are no match for ours. My friends, this is exactly the sort of behaviour I am tired of chastising you for. We are the rulers here. We are the conquerors. The tribesmen are little more than animals, worshipping the trees and the earth. If I decide to walk through their holy places, then I shall. If I decide to tear them up and pave them over, then I shall. And if they protest, the legion will march out and cut them down. Look,’ he said with a sudden smile. ‘I will show you. I will prove to you that these heathen gods have no power.’

Marcus turned and ran towards the stones. His friends followed uneasily, Galerius gasping breathlessly as he tried to keep up. Once in the circle, Marcus stopped and began to walk around. He extended his arms out to either side of his body, palms up, and began to shout.

‘Here I am! Here I am, and I deny you! Gods? I think not. You are the fantasies of a barbarian race, creatures of superstitious dread. You have no substance, no power ... I piss on you.’ Marcus moved over to one of the stones and started to tug at his britches. ‘I am the Lord here. I am the Master. I will hunt you down, and I will destroy you where I find you!’ Laughing, Marcus let loose a thick stream of yellow urine against the side of the stone.

Hot liquid splattered onto the moss and lichen and dribbled down to the ground. Even in the heat of the evening, it steamed slightly. Still laughing, Marcus finished and fastened himself back up. ‘You see?’ he asked his uneasy companions, as the acrid stink of piss wafted over them. ‘There is nothing to fear here.’

‘Who are you?’ asked a melodic voice from behind Marcus. Galerius turned and ran. Octavius stood his ground, though his face was very pale. Marcus turned around with a sly smile on his face.

Stood within the circle of stones was a willowy girl with long red hair and huge green eyes. She was dressed in a flowing white dress which brushed the ground, and Marcus could see that she had no shoes or sandals on, though her feet were clean. The girl was beautiful. She had a heart-shaped face and soft white skin dusted with freckles. She wore the clothes of the tribes though, and Marcus stared at her with undisguised contempt.

‘Who am I? Who are you?’

‘I am the Maiden of Earth and Water,’ she said simply.

Octavius tugged at Marcus’s sleeve. ‘She appeared from thin air, Marcus. We should leave.’

Marcus turned on his friend. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. She stepped from behind one of the stones. That is all. You are jumping at shadows.’

‘She’s one of them, Marcus. Come on, let’s go.’

‘You go if you want. I will stay and show the peasant what a true Roman is.’ Marcus turned back to the girl. He sensed Octavius back away and then heard the thumps of the other man’s feet as he ran back towards the fort. ‘My companions are superstitious.’ He smiled without humour.

‘And you are not?’ asked the girl quietly.

Marcus scoffed. ‘Of course not. I was born in Rome, the greatest city in the world. I won’t be fooled by your trickery.’

‘Trickery?’ the girl asked with a smile of her own. ‘What trickery?’

‘Appearing from thin air ...’ Marcus laughed. ‘I know that is not possible.’

‘You know a lot, young Roman.’

‘I know enough. I know that Rome is the centre of the world, and eventually all people will bow to its greatness. Rome will last forever, and I am Roman.’

‘Nothing lasts forever,’ the girl said sadly. ‘Even your arrogance must one-day crumble.’ She reached out and touched one of the stones gently. ‘This place was once a shrine to a hero of our people. He stood against a beast of great evil and he died. People came here every year to lay flowers in the circle. His deeds were legend amongst the tribes. Now the tribes are broken, and they have forgotten their heritage. And people like you can come and defile it with your words and deeds. It is a sad thing, but the magic of the land slowly dies beneath your cities and roads.’

‘That is the difference between my people and yours: Rome is eternal. It will stand until the end of time.’ The girl laughed out loud and Marcus bristled. ‘You doubt my word?’

‘You are a child. I have seen the many futures, and Rome will fall just as every other Empire has. A new Empire will rise from this very isle, an Empire

that will make Rome look insignificant, and yet even that will fall in time. Nothing lasts forever.'

'You have seen the future? So, you claim to be one of the heathen gods?'

'I claim nothing. I am simply the Maiden of Earth and Water.'

'You are far too ripe to be a maiden. Lay down here, and I shall pluck you and show you what a Roman man can do.'

'What of Annaea, Marcus? You would lie with me on the eve of your wedding?'

'How do you know of Annaea?' he snapped, angry to be chastised.

The girl simply shrugged and then turned to walk away. She hesitated. 'Do not come back here,' she said over her shoulder. Anger overwhelmed Marcus.

Leaping forwards, he gripped the girl's arm and spun her around. 'How dare you talk to me like that! I am Marcus Aquila Romila, citizen of Rome, son of the governor. I will have you whipped.'

The girl's green eyes flashed, and Marcus felt a frisson of power run through the hand that held her. He stepped back uncertainly, his hand dropping to his side.

'You doubt my power,' she said. 'Perhaps I can prove it to you.'

'How? You will not fool me with your cheap parlour tricks.'

'I shall grant you a wish, though there will be a price.'

Marcus laughed, his confidence returning. 'What could I possibly wish for? I have everything I could ever want.' The girl simply stared at him with those disconcerting green eyes. Marcus could feel the challenge in them, and he bridled. 'I have a wish. Rome will stand eternal and so shall I. I wish to live forever, so that I may see the Empire's destiny for myself!'

'Granted,' said the girl with the green eyes. Then, to Marcus's sudden and heart-stopping consternation, she vanished.

THURSDAY



MARK

Heavy drops pattered down on the windscreen, obscuring Mark's view of the street. He stared at the address opposite, trying to ignore the feeling that he was looking out of a fish tank. He wanted to use the wipers, but that would mean movement and noise, and that would risk drawing attention. He could see well enough to notice if anybody left the house.

Shuffling deeper into the thick hooded top he was wearing, Mark stared out into the night. The road he was on was dark. Two of the streetlights were out, and the driving rain dimmed the rest. The terraced houses seemed to huddle together for comfort in the darkness and the cold, or maybe they were crowded together for safety.

The road he was parked on lay off Alexandra Road in the middle of Moss Side, the most infamous suburb of Greater Manchester. It was not nearly as bad as it had been, Mark thought. Hell, even in the 1970s when the gang-related violence in the area had led to Manchester being dubbed 'Gunchester', it had not been that bad. There had been worse times, but people forget.

Still, it was a deprived area with all the problems that deprivation brought. He had been here for hours, sitting in a beaten-up old Ford Escort, which was parked at the side of the road. He had arrived after dark with the intention of staying until just before dawn if necessary. He could not read a book for fear of

missing his target. He could not listen to the radio for fear the noise would draw somebody's gaze. All he could do was sit and stare at the house.

'Why do you do it?' he asked himself out loud. A surge of hatred flooded through him. The blind emotion answered his question. Gritting his teeth against the hurt and the pain, Mark focussed more intently on the house. This was his third night. He knew that sooner or later the target would have to leave. Its kind were too arrogant not to. Then Mark could take care of business and return to his warm home. He wondered if he should bring somebody else in – a mercenary to do this business for him. Sergei and his band of cut-throats would be ideal, and they were already on the books. It was a question that he had asked himself a million times over the years, and just as he always had done, he dismissed it. He had to do this himself for two reasons: First, he was the only one who could. Second, he needed to see them die.

The front door opened an inch. For a moment, Mark thought it was his imagination. Then the door swung wide and somebody scampered out into the rain. Darkness hid any detail, but the figure had the tell-tale hip swing of a woman. She appeared to be wearing sunglasses. Mark watched as the woman walked quickly up the road, her shoulders hunched, and her head bowed against the elements. Mark pulled a large syringe from the glove compartment of his car. The needle was five inches long. He looked at it distastefully, then tapped the tip a couple of times. He pulled his clothes up around his armpits to expose his chest.

Positioning the sharp point over his heart, he drove it all the way in with one powerful thrust. He sat there for a second, paralysed by the pain, hating the feel of strange steel in his body. Then, with barely a whimper, he pushed the plunger and felt the cold wash of liquid that drenched the inside of his chest.

Wrenching the needle out, he tossed it onto the passenger seat and massaged his left pectoral convulsively. Regaining his breath, Mark opened the car door and stepped out onto the footpath.

An icy sheet of water cascaded over him: he was soaked before he had gone two steps. The cheap black hooded jumper, though warm, was in no way waterproof. Beneath it, he wore another even cheaper jumper, and then a t-shirt

he'd bought in a bag of three at his local supermarket.

When he left his house, the night had been cold but dry. The weather report had promised it would stay that way until mid-morning tomorrow, at which point a storm was expected. It had landed early. The severity of the downpour had caught Mark unprepared. Fortunately, he was wearing khaki canvas trousers and a sturdy pair of black Alt-Berg boots. They went some way to keeping the rain out of his socks.

Pulling the hood over his head so his face was hidden, Mark followed the woman. It was not hard: Whoever she was, she appeared to be completely absorbed with her walk in the rain. Mark knew that this wasn't necessarily the case, but he did not mind. It suited his purpose. The woman moved on, hurrying through side streets in a southerly direction.

They came to Claremont Road. Mark was pleased to see that it was deserted. The rain was working for him. The woman crossed to the opposite side, and Mark followed. The railings of Alexandra Park appeared through the rain. The woman disappeared through a gate into the park. Mark walked up to the entrance and stopped. A frown creased his brow as he stared in cautiously.

It was completely black. There were no lights beyond the boundary railings, and any ambient illumination from the street was quickly beaten down by the hammering rain. Mark peered in as if uncertain, but he was smiling inside. After a few seconds, he moved into the park. The darkness swallowed him.

For a while he followed the curving paths randomly, trying to ignore the relentless rain that held the numbing chill of the night. Five minutes passed, then ten, and still nothing happened. Mark began to wonder if maybe the target had simply slipped through the park and vanished, leaving him soaked to the skin for nothing. It had already happened twice before – she was smart and seemingly possessed of a sixth sense to danger. Every time he had tried to get close with a gun, she had managed to slip away.

Mark kept walking. Soon he came to the side of a large pond at the opposite side of the park. Just as he was beginning to give up, she stepped in front of him from out of nowhere.

For a second they stood in silence. The wind had picked up and the rain was

coming in horizontally now, slicing up under his hood and stinging his face and eyes. They watched each other, maybe ten feet apart. The path they were on was close to the road. Only a ragged line of bushes and a few leafless trees ran along the railings. Consequently, some light filtered through from the sodium lamps on Alexandra Road South. In the dull light, Mark saw that the woman was about six feet tall, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. Her features were hidden behind a huge pair of sunglasses.

‘Why are you following me?’ she hissed, her words cutting through the pounding of the rain like tearing paper. Cold water dribbled down Mark’s back, and he shuddered; whether from the cold, apprehension, or anticipation, he could not tell. Mark did not answer the question, and after a moment the woman continued. ‘I’ve seen you sitting outside my house in that old car for days now. You have followed me twice, carrying a gun, yet you come unarmed this time, so I allow you to get close. I am curious. You are watching me. Why?’

Mark just smiled. The woman grunted in anger. ‘What? Do you want to rob me? Do you? You have the wrong person if that is your plan. Do you think you followed me here? No, I led you here. I led you here to have a small heart to heart with you.’ Still, Mark didn’t answer. ‘Answer me, damn you!’ The woman’s shout rang through the empty park like a gunshot, then went on to echo around the squat buildings that surrounded it.

‘I’m here to kill you,’ Mark said quietly.

For a second, the woman simply stared through the thick, black sunglasses. Then she began to laugh. ‘Kill me?’ she asked through her mirth. ‘Little man, I do not know who put you up to this, but you have made a terrible mistake. Even with your gun, you are defenceless against me.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well I do.’ The sunglasses on her face suddenly cracked. The noise was loud, a sharp contrast to the pattering of rain. Spider webs marred the black surfaces, but these soon lost their lines as the plastic began to bulge outwards. The bulges began to glow a dull red, becoming blisters that bubbled and spat. Red burned to white, and the plastic lenses collapsed and dribbled away. Mark stared at what lay beneath.

Instead of eyes there were only gaping pits, the skin around them black and charred. In those holes, twin balls of flame spun and flared. The fire danced out over the woman's face to caress her cheeks and nose. The glasses finally succumbed to the inferno and melted, running down her face and dropping in molten globs that hissed angrily when they hit the rain-swept ground. They left a trail of black plastic tears that ran from eyes to chin. The flames blazed brighter; fire spilled out of her eye sockets. Where the fire touched her flesh, the skin blistered and cracked, only to heal again almost instantly.

'Do you see?' the woman asked mockingly. 'I will tear your heart out and eat it.' She moved as she spoke, a fluid stream of lithe muscle in the curtain of water. Where the rain hit her eyes, it sputtered and steamed. Mark tried to throw his hands up in defence, but he was not fast enough. The woman with the flame eyes was on him in less than a second, and hot, slender fingers wrapped around his throat.

Mark drove a fist up into the woman's gut. His knuckles popped against her tough, solid body. Up close, he could see deep into her fiery eyes, and it was like staring into the sun. A blinding pain ran through the back of his head as he felt his retinas sear away. The woman was laughing. Fire licked Mark's face, and he felt his own skin begin to blister. The agony was intense. He screamed. It was a wretched, bestial sound.

Mark was carried to the ground, kicking and punching futilely. He felt something slam into his ribcage, over his heart. There was a tearing sound as the skin parted, and then a sickening cracking noise as the bones beneath splintered. A moment later he felt something scorching, writhing in his chest, and he knew it was the woman's fingers.

Pain lanced through him, and he screamed again as his attacker began to tug at something deep in Mark's body. Another scream as the arteries that held his heart in place parted under the assault, and Mark felt the organ ripped from him.

'Kill me?' the woman demanded furiously. 'I, who have lived for centuries, feasting on your kind – you dare to threaten me? I'll eat your heart and take your soul.' Mark heard the woman begin to chew. He waited for a few seconds as the awful pain subsided. Then he sat up.

Vision was already returning. The damaged cells in his eyes were regenerating so quickly that he felt the tingle of growth. He felt a new heart growing in his chest, even as the bones fused back together and the skin puckered and healed without a scar.

He fingered the blood-drenched hole in his hooded top and absently thought it a shame that it couldn't repair itself as well. He forgot about it as he levered himself to his feet and stared down at the woman who had torn out his heart and eaten it.

Her mouth was smeared with blood, her lips peeled back in a rictus of pain; the fires of her eyes began to dim. The woman thrashed around on the ground, clearly in agony. Mark wandered over to her and kicked her as hard as he could in the side. He heard something snap.

'That's for breaking my heart, you bitch,' he said wryly.

'What did you do?' the woman gasped.

'I haven't met one of you bastards that doesn't want to rip a man's heart out, one way or another. You're the first one that I've noticed enjoys eating them, though. I've been watching you for months; obviously, you noticed me. As you said, I couldn't get close to you with a gun, so I improvised. I injected myself with a mixture of silver and cyanide. Right in the heart. The silver will keep you down until the cyanide can do its work. You're going to die hard, but it'll be quick. It's more than you deserve.'

The flames in his enemy's eyes were little more than a flicker now, and her eye sockets were nothing but blank, staring holes that led to nowhere. Mark hawked and spat into one of them. The flame went out.

'How?' the woman demanded with a death rattle. 'How did you live?' For a moment, Mark thought about telling her, and then he shrugged.

As he watched her die, he did not feel the rain or the cold, or the stickiness of the blood that had welded his clothes to his torso. All he felt was satisfaction. The feeling culminated when the last flicker of fire in her remaining eye – the light of her life – was finally extinguished.

Seconds later, the body ignited. Flames punched out of her torso and into the rain. Hunched up against the wet, Mark watched the corpse burn away until

nothing was left but a sludge of soggy ash. When the last embers had died, he turned and walked away, back to his car, and back to his warm, comfortable home.

Camhlaidh

CAM FELT LIKE FIRE WAS RUNNING DOWN HIS THROAT. HE CHOKED AND NEARLY dropped his glass. Eyes watering, he turned to the woman in front of him.

‘Jesus, are you trying to poison me, Elsa?’

The woman looked at him with a bored expression. ‘You asked for the cheapest whisky, Cam. That’s the cheapest whisky.’

‘That’s antifreeze. No, that’s an insult to antifreeze – antifreeze tastes better than that.’

‘And how would you know?’ asked another man at the bar.

Cam turned and looked down the length of his nose at the speaker. Then, not deigning to reply, he turned back to Elsa. ‘Another one, I think.’

‘Even though it tastes like antifreeze?’ Elsa asked as she poured a second shot.

‘I find that after the initial bite, antifreeze is quite an acceptable substitute for whisky. As long as you don’t mind temporary blindness.’ Cam tipped back his head and poured the second shot down his throat. He gagged for a few seconds as he wordlessly gestured for a third.

‘Why would you want to drink antifreeze?’ Elsa asked as she filled Cam’s glass with more of the cheap whisky.

‘Sometimes providence leaves me a little light in the pocket, and the blue fairy is a good way to smooth out the inebriation-to-disbursement ratio.’ He smiled his best smile.

Elsa harrumphed. ‘Well, I hope you’re not a little light tonight.’

Cam's eyes widened with outrage. 'Of course not,' he said, aghast. 'If I was going to flit out on the tab, I'd be drinking the best stuff you've got, not this swill.' He threw back the third shot and fought his gag reflex. 'Jesus,' he said after the nausea had passed, 'I think I should go on to Guinness.'

Elsa poured him a pint. Cam paid her. Satisfied, she wandered away to serve another patron.

Taking a sip of his drink, Cam swivelled on his stool to survey the rest of the bar. The Green Man was a regular haunt for the downtrodden and world weary. The wooden floor was scuffed by the soles of a thousand staggering feet, the broad tables scarred by keys or knives, and stained with a multitude of spilled drinks. The lighting was dim and the shadows dark. Recesses in the walls provided hiding places for those drunk and wretched enough to count themselves as clientele. There was a jukebox, but nobody ever put money into it. There was a gambling machine too, but it had been broken for so long, it had become invisible. There were no pictures or posters or decorations of any type, and the brick walls were bare – not through any attempt at old world chic, but simply because there was no point in covering them.

This was a drinking man's pub. The only woman that ever came in, apart from the occasional lost student, was Elsa. Cam risked a glance at the landlady out of the corner of his eye. Elsa was just over six feet tall and four feet across. She had arms like telephone pylons and brutal, flat features that lay host to a twice-broken nose. Cam was half-convinced she had Jöttnar blood in her. Elsa didn't bother to employ bouncers; the few idiots brave or stupid enough to tangle with Elsa usually took a trip up to Hope Hospital afterwards. 'Brave' and 'stupid' – in Cam's opinion, the two words were synonymous with one another.

No, the Green Man was not a place to go and make friends or meet women. Nobody here enjoyed themselves. Nobody knew your name. Behind the plain bar with its grimy mirror and rows of half-full bottles, beneath the peanut-strewn floor and the stench of rarely-cleaned urinals, the Green Man provided only one thing: it was a place anybody could come and find alcohol-serrated oblivion.

Depressingly, Cam felt that he could see something of himself in the dirty, scarred bar. It was a place of helplessness and it harboured only the lost. The

people that came here did not belong, but they had nowhere else to go. Around him were misfits and crazies, eccentrics and downright lunatics, all hitting the same low from a hundred different directions. Cam swivelled back and put his elbows on the sticky bar. He gazed at himself in the mirror. He fit neatly into the misfit category.

A frown wrinkled the brow of his image. Could you fit neatly into the misfit category? Christ, the cheap whisky was getting to him. He dismissed the thought and went back to staring at his mirrored self.

Long hair, which glowed with life and refused to tangle no matter how he abused it, framed a finely boned face that hadn't an ounce of fat. High cheekbones and deep eyes gave him an otherworldly appearance, which was only intensified by the flawless alabaster skin stretched between them. His lips were full, and laughter lines creased the sides of his eyes and mouth in a way that inspired trust and warmth in those who met him. His eyes were a vivacious violet, and they sparkled no matter how poor the ambient light was. His hair fell below his shoulders like a spun gold waterfall. Cam knew, without any trace of narcissism, that he was not merely handsome. He was beautiful.

A croaking voice interrupted his reverie. 'Maybe I should try and drink antifreeze,' said the patron to Cam's left. He turned and found himself staring into the bloodshot eyes of a scruffy little man. He had thinning hair and massive, uncombed moustaches that appeared to contain most of a shredded boiled egg. A waft of stale sweat and old socks came from his direction.

'I wouldn't,' Cam said. 'It'd most likely kill you.'

The man began to laugh. 'I knew it. I knew you'd never drunk antifreeze.' The man turned back to his drink, still giggling drunkenly to himself. Cam ignored him. He had lied, of course; he would never have to drink antifreeze simply because he was broke: he was never broke. Cam drank to escape, and occasionally he experimented. Antifreeze had tasted very nice. Almost sweet, but that could have been the pineapple juice mixer. In the end though, the stuff hadn't really got him any drunker, so he'd gone back to tequila.

Finishing his pint, Cam ordered another and settled into the long, grim process of getting utterly and incapably drunk. He would not be happy until he

could not remember who or what he was. It was going to be a long night.

Samuel

DARKNESS REIGNED.

A thick blanket of angry cloud hid the moon and conspired with the driving rain to bring visibility down to a few scant feet. The December chill leached the heat from everything, turning the city centre buildings into vague grey monoliths that reared, menacing and aloof, in the hazy glow of the streetlamps: cold, oversized tombstones that promised only grim indifference. The hard patter of fat raindrops falling onto concrete and into black puddles was lost in the whisper of the wind. The gusts that swept down the dark street were not particularly powerful, but they were still quite capable of cutting through even the sturdiest of coats, to run icy hands up and down a warm body.

Sam Autumn hunched his head into the upturned collar of his sadly inadequate jacket and cursed himself once more for not bringing an umbrella. He was cold and wet. The winter's night had sneered at his thin suit, so practical for a Thursday in the office, and proceeded to work its frigid waters through the weave and weft to brush almost tenderly against his flesh.

Another gust of Arctic air washed over him, chilling the already cold water that had soaked into his designer shirt. A violent shudder caused his teeth to clash together in an uncontrollable chatter. He pulled the suit jacket tighter around his gaunt frame and flexed his fingers in an effort to work some heat back into them.

Numbness spread up his hands, and he clutched them under his armpits in a useless attempt to warm them. It didn't work, and his jacket fell open. Sam shivered and swore. His words were slurred. Water dripped into his eyes. When he had first gotten caught in the cloudburst, rainwater had run through his hair,

washing the gel from his stylish messy cut and burning his eyes. Now that burn had vanished with the purged hair product, and he suspected that he looked like a drowned rat.

It hadn't mattered that he had no winter coat when he'd left the pub; he had expected to quickly find a taxi to take him home. Usually Manchester was awash with them. They parked on corners, or in box junctions, or stopped to talk to each other on busy main roads. They drove with scurrilous disregard for anybody else, their unexpected U-turns and lane changes left to other road users to sort out.

Whenever Sam had to drive into town, he was always forced to avoid some careering Hackney Carriage that appeared quite out of control. Yet when he actually needed their services, there wasn't one to be found. Cursing all taxi drivers, who he half-suspected were a secret fraternity bound to create chaos, he trudged onward in search of that magical yellow light, which would promise succour from the hateful weather ... and a lift home.

Miserable and damp, Sam kept walking for a few more minutes before he realised that he was heading into Salford and in completely the wrong direction. He stood still for a second, bemused that he could have got so turned around. He was on Quay Street. He blearily remembered turning up there to see if any of the late pubs were kicking out, hoping that maybe a rank of taxis had formed to ferry the late-night revellers home, but he had been disappointed. He'd drunk far too much. Tabby would be furious with him.

Deciding that Bridge Street might be a better prospect, Sam staggered into the gloom of Gartside Street, intending to cut through Spinningfields. Stoically, he fought his way into the wind and rain, and pulled his head deeper into his collar. He barely noticed the massive hole in the street in time. For a second, he teetered on the lip of a huge, dark chasm. He wind-milled his arms furiously as he felt himself sliding into the pit. The wind at his back seemed to take a gleeful delight in pushing him further into the hole's gaping maw, and for a terrifying moment, he thought his drunken limbs were going to let him down. His expensive shoes slid on the damp tarmac, and Sam's heart fluttered in despair. Then with one last wobble, he regained his balance and stepped backwards.

Roadworks. Some drunken moron had removed the barriers that had surrounded them, and Sam nearly fell in. A pizza box lay empty and sodden on the edge of the pit. He peered past it and could see the faint blue gleam of a gas main through a malevolent and muddy puddle. It was a conspiracy, he decided forlornly. Taxi drivers and the Council – those faceless bureaucrats that sat in offices and randomly redesigned the layout of the roads to include as many bus lanes and mini-roundabouts as possible – were actively seeking to make his life unbearable.

He kicked the pizza box petulantly into the hole and then carried on towards Bridge Street. The wind seemed to be laughing at him as he walked. Sam wrapped his arms around his frozen chest and kept on going.

It had all started off innocently enough with a few drinks after work. It was Thursday, after all – almost the weekend. Annalise had organised it, sashaying through the office in that low-cut blouse and tight black skirt, her long blond hair flowing behind her like a cape of liquid gold, her green eyes flashing dangerously while her lush, red lips quirked in that peculiar smile of hers. It was a smile that promised everything and delivered nothing, yet there wasn't a man in the office who was going to say no to her. Besides, a couple of drinks after work weren't going to hurt.

At six o'clock, Sam, Annalise, Toby the creepy office junior, and a few others (including Mr. Milton, one of the partners at Milton & Hill Solicitors where Sam worked), had all piled into a pub near the town hall. Mr. Milton bought the first round and waved off all attempts to pay him back. Twenty minutes later, Sam was listening to Toby tell him about his collection of spiders. He nodded politely while his flesh crawled at the graphic descriptions of poison, digestive juices, and fly soup. All the while, he battled an embarrassing surge of jealousy as he watched Annalise flirt with Mr. Milton.

Guiltily, Sam thought of his wife of three years. Tabby was a petite woman, with long black hair and a wonderfully wide smile. She was shy and kind and generous. But Annalise exuded a sultry miasma. Her hot eyes charged the air around her, and her smile oozed lazy sexuality. Annalise was a vision that grabbed the libido and simply wouldn't let go. Tabby had none of that. They

were two completely different people, and Sam was ashamed to realise that he wanted Annalise on a very basic level.

The train of thought had made him uncomfortable, and he stood up making his excuses to leave. Annalise was there in an instant, sitting down next to his vacated seat and stretching languorously in a manner that invited every eye to the swollen curve of her breast. She asked him where he was going, her throaty voice so full of promiscuous guarantee that he sat back down without a word. He had drunk far too much, staying until only the two of them were left.

When she placed a flirtatious hand on his arm and asked him huskily if he would like to share a taxi with her, he had jerked to his feet in sudden panic and apologised inanely. Leaving her sitting there with a wounded expression on her perfect face, he had staggered hurriedly into the night, thoughts of Tabby at the forefront of his mind. His wife was going to be so angry with him.

Back in the present, Sam cursed again. The rain was now coming down so heavily that there was nothing but a wall of water in front of him. Gushing jets tumbled from the overflowing gutters of the buildings around him, falling to the road with an angry susurrus.

‘I could be fucking Annalise right now,’ he said to himself under his breath. Immediately, a sobering rush of guilt flooded through him. He was many things, but he loved his wife completely and he would never cheat on her. God should strike him down for thinking that way.

A second later he was lying on his back, staring up into the blinding rain. The back of his skull throbbed where his head had hit the tarmac of the road. He lay in an overflowing gutter with cold water nipping at his back and legs. More rain pooled in the wells of his eye sockets and his open mouth.

Blinking and spluttering, Sam levered himself up into a sitting position and looked around him. Nobody was about. Holding the back of his aching head and fighting the urge to throw up, Sam got back to his feet, thinking that he must have fallen over. He had a vague memory of a flash of light, but he didn’t know what could have caused it. The streetlights were uniformly dull behind the wash of water, and the buildings around him were shut and lifeless. Maybe it had been lightning, he thought. Maybe God had been listening. He barked a nervous

laugh. The rain hissed back.

He absently tried to scrape the excess water from his sodden clothing. He was utterly drenched. Even if he found a taxi, he doubted the driver would want the cab messed up with the mud and filth that covered him. Sam started cursing again, his vociferous litany so loud that it rose above the constant patter of the rain.

In response, Sam heard a low groan. Stopping very still and closing his mouth, Sam listened in the manner of any seasoned city dweller hearing a strange noise in an out-of-the-way street after dark – suspiciously. The groan came again. It did not sound threatening; in fact, it sounded like somebody in pain. Sam stood in the rain undecided. On the one hand, he wanted to find out if somebody needed his help. On the other, he did not want to become involved. Slowly he began to back towards Quay Street.

The groan came again. It was full of misery. There was a rasping quality to it, as if whoever was making it was choking. It seemed to be coming from a dark alcove, a hundred feet or so up the road. Sam stopped. It sounded like somebody was drowning. In this weather, it wouldn't surprise him. He turned and walked away, leaving the alley.

On Quay Street, he stood for a second with shame burning in him. Somebody might be dying, and he had walked away. A rational part of him said he was doing the right thing, not getting involved – in this day and age who knew what might happen? It was probably a drug addict thrashing around in his sleep. If he went to help, he could get robbed or stabbed with a needle, or worse. It might be a trap with a horde of desperate homeless people waiting to jump him. He supposed he could call the police, but what would they say? In all likelihood, they'd just tell him to go and have a look. No thanks. Anyway, they'd probably think he was being silly. Wasting their time. Wasn't that illegal? Definitely best to just stay out of the way. It was on the news every day after all – acts of random kindness always ended up with the Samaritan dead or arrested.

Hunching his shoulders, Sam looked up Quay Street. There, coming towards him through the driving rain, was a black cab. Sam lurched to the side of the road and threw his arm out. The cab slowed and stopped in a puddle, sending a

wave of water flooding over his shins and feet. Sam hardly even noticed. The cab driver, an old Sikh with thick plastic glasses and a maroon turban, wound down the driver's side window.

'Where are you going?' he asked. Sam told him his address and heard the gentle and welcoming *thunk* of the doors unlocking.

'Get in then.'

Sam clambered gratefully into the back, and the cab started to pull off. The groaning from the alley filled his imagination and he squirmed. For the second time that night, he felt guilty. 'Wait,' he shouted.

'What?' the cab driver asked as the cab jerked to a halt.

'I've ... erm ... I've not got my wallet,' Sam said, making it up as he went along. 'I fell over in that street ... I must have dropped it. Just hang on, and I'll go and have a look.'

'Okay. I'll wait here.'

Sam clambered out of the cab, back into the unforgiving rain, and peered into Gartside Street. It was dark.

Sam shivered. 'What the hell am I doing?' he asked himself under his breath before he stepped back into the alley. He quickly walked to the alcove.

The groaning had stopped. At first, he thought the object lying in the doorway was a pile of white rubbish bags. Then it moved, and Sam jumped back thinking that maybe there were rats. As his eyes got used to the gloom, he saw that the bundle was moving on its own. Wiping the rain from his eyes, Sam crouched down to take a closer look. The bundle rolled completely over, and Sam let out a cry as he saw what it was.

A naked man lay on the ground with a sword jutting from his gut. The gurgling groan came again, and Sam realised that he had been correct; the man was drowning, but in his own blood rather than rainwater. The sword must have punctured something important.

Scrabbling for his mobile phone with one hand, Sam moved closer to the man and knelt beside him. 'It's okay,' he said. 'I'll get help. I'll get an ambulance.' As he tried to pull the phone out of his drenched pocket, Sam laid his other hand on the man's shoulder. A brutal shock ran from his fingertips, up

his arm, and then it closed an iron fist around his mind. A voice that was not a voice roared in his ears, unmanning him. Such was the fury and power in that voice that Sam lost control of his bladder, and warm urine joined the water that already weighed his trousers down.

Words crushed him: *Pull it out!* It was a thing of emotion and will, rather than language.

Still reeling, Sam dropped the phone to the ground and gripped the hilt of the sword with both hands. He let out a cry of effort as he dragged the blade out of the man's torso. Then it was free, and he fell backwards, losing his grip on the weapon, which flew from his hands to skid across the ground. It clattered beneath a railing and out of sight.

Lying on the cold ground again, Sam rubbed at his abused temples. A figure stepped into sight above him. It was the naked man. The blood that had covered him was already washing away in the rain. He was very tall with long, wild hair.

Odd-looking, Sam thought, though he couldn't explain exactly why. The man's eyes were hidden in the shadow of his brows, leaving two bottomless holes in his face. His mouth opened, too wide, and Sam saw row upon row of tiny, vicious-looking teeth that gleamed even in the dull light. Then those teeth were descending towards him, and Sam let out one long terrified scream as they found his throat.

GRÍMNIR

SOMEWHERE FAR BELOW THE STREET, DEEP IN THE EARTH AND THE SLIME OF crawling things, a tiny fragment of bone rested. It was a shard of a shard, invisible to the naked eye: a slice so thin it barely existed.

The shard had been in the same general place for a very long time, though it had moved a short distance as it broke off from larger pieces, subject to the

whims of the shifting earth and the upheavals of man. Burrowing animals had shoved it aside. Worms had ingested and defecated it, and the meagre acid in their stomachs had pitted and scarred it even further. The years had shrunk it to little more than a speck.

The shard of bone had lain amongst the soil and stone of the area for over two and a half millennia without doing anything particularly interesting. If somebody were to decide, on a whim, to place this shard under a microscope powerful enough to examine it, they would see nothing more than bone. A sliver far too small to tell the story of who or what it might have belonged to, what sex they were, what life they lived, or how they died ... but then, humans are a race notable for their blinkered existence. No human would have noticed the spark of magic that infused the shard.

A creature capable of seeing the magic – one capable of looking beneath the ground, through the slabs of concrete, water mains, and cables – might have seen the halo of energy that suffused the soil for a hundred feet in each direction. They would have seen it because other bone shards, very much like the first, lay scattered through the dirt. If they had watched, they would have seen something incredible.

Slowly at first, but with greater and greater speed, the shards began to squirm through the damp soil towards each other. They seemed possessed of crazed urgency as they bonded back together.

Soon, a skeleton lay in decrepit ruin where before there had been nothing. Then the true magic awoke, and the soil around the dead thing began to turn into blood and flesh. Sinew writhed from the darkness to grip the skull, working its way down shattered vertebrae, across chipped ribs, around hip and femur. Broken jaws opened slowly, and a silent scream ripped from a half-formed larynx.

The dead thing woke, far beneath the surface of the earth, in the agony of rebirth. Yet its first thought was not of fear or confusion: it was of a single-minded need to fulfil a destiny that had been etched into its flesh two and a half thousand years earlier.

Camhlaidh

‘WHAT YOU’VE GOT TO UNDERSTAND,’ CAM SAID, NOT HEARING THE DRUNKEN slur in his own voice, ‘is that the world is like a body. Like a big, round, blue and green human body. In space. With a moon and stuff. But that’s not the point: the point is that it’s like a body. And the body is dying. It’s on its way out. Oh, it used to be young and full of life and ... and energy, but now it’s dying!’ He slapped his hand down hard on the bar for emphasis. ‘Dying!’ he barked again.

The shabby man with the thinning hair and egg-laced moustache nodded blearily. His eyes were glazed, and he was having difficulty getting the nuts from a packet he held in his hand, into his mouth. A scatter of dry roasted peanuts littered the floor beneath his bar stool, a Jackson Pollock tribute to his intoxication.

‘Are you listening to me?’ Cam demanded in drunken indignation. ‘This is important. Very, very important!’ He slapped his hand down again but missed the bar. For a second, he didn’t quite understand what was going on. He slid inexorably from his bar stool towards the sticky floor. When his mind did finally catch up with things, he overcompensated, throwing himself backwards so that the bar stool flew from under him, and he crashed to the floor in a thrashing heap. The shabby man began to giggle maniacally.

Bouncing back to his feet, Cam quickly pulled the bar stool upright and cast a bleary eye out for Elsa. ‘It’s okay,’ he said with as much dignity as he could muster. ‘I’m not hurt.’ He sat back down and took a gulp of his Guinness. ‘Where was I?’

‘Some eco-bullshit,’ the shabby man gasped through his giggling fit.

‘Eco-bullshit?’ Cam demanded. ‘It is not “eco-bullshit”. The world used to be young and viv ... vivacious. Used to be full of energy. It had a pulse and a heart. Do you know what the heart was? It was magic.’ Cam sat back as if he had

just revealed the greatest mystery of the universe.

The shabby man stared back. 'So, what did antifreeze taste like, then?'

Cam leant forwards and gently slapped the man in the face. 'I told you not to drink that stuff. It'll kill you. But you need to listen to this. Magic! There used to be lots of it. Gallons of it, like beer, there to be drunk and enj ... enjoyed. It was like your blood ... you could feel it surging through you, in you, all around you.'

'You slapped me,' the shabby man whispered. His hand rose to probe the side of his face. 'Why'd you do that?'

'I'm trying to tell you something! You have to listen!'

'Sorry. Didn't know I had to listen.'

'Now it's dying. The flow has nearly stopped. Soon, soon there'll be nothing but bricks and steel and fucking cars ... there won't be anything left of the magic.'

'So what? What's so good about magic? Just some idiot with white gloves and a rabbit in a top hat, anyhow.'

'No,' Cam said desperately. 'No, no, no, no, no ... you're missing the point. It's real.'

'Yeah, and you drank antifreeze,' the shabby man said and began to giggle again. The giggle turned into a choking laugh, and a shower of dry roasted peanuts hit Cam in the face. Disgusted, he wiped the damp matter away and turned back to the bar.

'Moron,' he muttered under his breath. He finished his Guinness, belched, and then looked for Elsa to pour him another one. His vision was swimming, which was a good sign.

Soon he'd be unconscious, and Elsa would cart him into a back room and leave him there to sleep it off. He was enough of a regular that she allowed him that small liberty. He turned and glared at the shabby man, who had stopped coughing and was now muttering to himself about Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee drinking antifreeze out of champagne flutes.

The problem with humans, he thought to himself, was that they knew everything and nothing. Depression swamped him. Cam could feel the world dying around him and he hated it. He had been born too late, and he was out of

time. There were only a few of his kind left now, and they were slowly disappearing: dying, as the Earth died beneath their feet. The world had been raped and the magic was nearly gone, and when the last of it had finally dribbled away, he would fade. He should have had a life that spanned millennia, but he would be lucky to see his eightieth birthday. A mortal span – how depressing.

‘Elsa!’ he shouted. ‘Elsa, I need another drink ...’ As he started to look around for the landlady, a tidal wave of magical energy hit him square in the face. Cam flew backwards, and his head slammed against the hard floor. For a second, he watched the lights in the ceiling pirouette rather prettily around each other.

The voice of the shabby man came from very far away. ‘That’ll teach you for slapping me,’ he slurred. It hadn’t been the shabby man though, Cam knew. It had been something unbelievable. Something frightening. ‘Bloody hell,’ Cam said.

Samuel

LYING IN THE DARKNESS, THE GASH IN HIS THROAT BURNING AS THE REST OF HIS flesh faded away, Sam tried to make sense of what had just happened to him. The alcohol was gone from his system; the shock of the assault had caused a surge of adrenaline that had neutralised the drug in moments.

The rain still poured down on him, and the icy deluge felt strange against the hot blood pumping out of his throat. Sam had both hands clamped around the wound in a desperate attempt to staunch the flow. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t. So, he just lay there, praying for a miracle and wondering how his life had come to this.

A lot of things ran through his mind as he lay there dying. He thought of his wife, Tabby, and how he wished fervently that he could see her one more time.

He only needed a few seconds: just long enough to tell her that he loved her and that the time he had spent with her had been the happiest of his life.

He thought about how he would never have children; about how he would never see his father again; about the things he would never do, like pack it all in and go and live on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean.

Mostly, he thought about a man impaled on a sword, impossible words in his head, and razor-sharp teeth in his throat. Try as he might, Sam simply couldn't rationalise what had happened. He thought about how a random act of kindness had brought him to this dark street, in the driving rain, while his lifeblood pumped onto the tarmac of the street and washed away forever down the nearest grid. He should have known better. He had known better. Stupid.

Idly, he wondered how long he had been unconscious. It could have only been moments, he reasoned – any more time and he would have bled out and woken up dead. The thought of waking up dead caused a grim laugh to hiss through his lips. He felt air brush over the gash in his throat, and he began to cry soundlessly. His limbs were dead weights, and the cold was starting to disappear. Worryingly, he began to feel comfortable. The world around him drifted away in a warm haze. There was nothing ...

A noise brought him back from his death-fugue: footsteps. Sam wrestled himself up with a titanic effort of will, and saw a man walking towards him through the sheets of rain. It wasn't the man who had attacked him. Hope blossomed, and Sam reached out a heavy hand imploringly. The man came and stood over him.

Looking up into cold, dead eyes, Sam's hand slowly slipped back to his throat. He clutched at his wound protectively. At first, he could not make out whether the figure was a man or a woman. The street was dark, but there was enough light to see an androgynous face, set in a head far too big for an unnaturally skinny body. Wispy hair lay plastered against a huge forehead. Beneath it, a long, sharp nose hooked out over thick, rubbery lips. It was wearing a cheap blue polyester suit that was also far too big. It was a man, Sam decided.

The rain had soaked the man's clothing. Beneath the billowing jacket, he had a scrawny frame. There wasn't an ounce of muscle or fat on his body. Stick thin,

Sam thought. The man would have been a laughable sight if it weren't for his eyes. Even in the gloom they glittered in a blank, soulless way. They had a bulbous quality to them, and they stuck out from his face obscenely. After a few moments of staring up into those dead eyes, Sam realised that they never blinked, even when rain spattered directly into them.

Sam tried to ask for help, but his throat was thick and raw. The only sound he could make was a rasping gasp. Dead Eyes cocked his head to one side and stared down at Sam a little longer. Sam felt like a small animal in a vivisection lab. Fear started to well up in him. The blood was hot beneath his hands. He wondered how he could still be alive. The man knelt beside him and there was a look of hunger in those awful eyes, which terrified Sam more than anything else that had happened to him that evening. The man quickly rifled through Sam's pockets. Sam noticed that the man had no fingernails – just blunt, fleshy fingertips that splayed out slightly at the end like suction cups. Then he bent down close, and his tongue flicked out to lick at the blood at Sam's throat. Sam closed his eyes.

A rumble of thunder echoed down the street. The man stood up urgently, his oversized head weaving back and forth as he peered into the gloomy rainstorm. Sam was apparently – and thankfully – forgotten. Lowering his head back to the hard ground, Sam began to concentrate on staying alive. He counted his heartbeats. They thundered in his ears. Strangely, they were constant and steady. Something farther down the alley caught his attention. Dead Eyes was staring at it too; his face twisted into a snarl that bared large, crooked teeth set into bloodless gums beneath wormy lips.

A localised tornado had sprung up a few feet away. The rain was sucked up into the funnel until it became a manifest thing of furious water. The spout hovered in place, ignoring the wind that blew around it. Then the road beneath it slowly erupted.

Sam watched, amazed, as the hard surface was ripped away like wet paper. Slabs of tarmac were flung away, hissing through the air and smashing into walls with gunshot cracks. A water main ruptured with a boom, and a geyser shot up into the night. It was sucked into the tornado, which whipped up above the

buildings around it, its top lost in the haze of the rainstorm.

Dirt and earth turned it a brooding black. It spun upward, weaving an odd pattern that was shot through with its own radiance, as if a lightning storm raged deep at its core. Dead Eyes stood before it, both hands opening and closing spasmodically, his uneven teeth still bared as if spoiling for a fight.

The whirlwind started to shrink. Soon, it was a squat man-sized thing of rolling fury. It decelerated on the spot until its energy was spent, and nothing was left but a deep waterlogged hole that quickly overflowed. A stream of water washed over the feet of Dead Eyes and continued towards Sam. Sam barely noticed when the dirty rivulet flowed under him. Dead Eyes watched the pool. For a moment, everything was still.

A hand burst through the surface of the water, then another. The hands writhed and splashed, desperately clawing the mud and earth at the edges. Sam had the overwhelming impression that whoever it was felt as lost and alone as he did.

A man dragged himself from the hole and lay on his stomach, gasping for air. Then he staggered clumsily to his feet. He was naked, like the man Sam had found impaled, though the resemblance ended there. This man was heavily muscled and covered in blue and green tattoos: wingless dragons crawled sinuously from his ankles, up his legs and over his torso, wrapping around each other in a display of Gordian intricacy. At his collarbone, the ophidian shapes reared up into tiny sightless mouths rimmed with fangs. Hundreds of the evil heads bristled around his neck in a collar of spitting rage.

The tattooed man's face was covered in a tangled mat of muddy hair, which made him look like some kind of painted Bigfoot. Rain poured over him, but the tattooed man didn't seem to care. He stared at the ground as though he were in a daze. Then he started to shake his head from side to side.

Dead Eyes cannoned into the tattooed man at a sprint. The two fell backwards onto the muddy ground. What followed was the most vicious and bloody fight Sam had ever seen. He lay there and watched, his hands still clasped around his throat, his own blood bubbling up through his fingers.

The tattooed man was massively muscled and taller than Dead Eyes by a

clear foot, but it didn't seem to matter. Dead Eyes made up for the weight disparity with sheer, unadulterated fury. As he collided with the tattooed man, he sank his chisel-like teeth into the big man's cheek, tearing a flap of skin clear off his face. Blood sprayed out in an arc, visible even in the heavy rain, and the tattooed man bellowed in pain and anger.

From where he lay, Sam's vision was confused by blood loss and a curtain of rain, but it appeared that Dead Eyes had become taller and even thinner. His skin was slick with rainwater, but there was something else – something slimy about him that Sam couldn't place.

The two rolled on the ground in a flailing mess of arms and legs. Dead Eyes slipped clear of the tattooed man and leapt to his feet. He immediately stamped on his adversary's head. Sam heard hollow thuds as he trampled the tattooed man's forehead and temples. The tattooed man tried to roll away, and Dead Eyes unleashed a powerful kick into his exposed face.

The tattooed man covered his head with his big arms. Dead Eyes slammed a foot into them, and Sam heard bone break. The tattooed man lashed out with one thick leg and knocked Dead Eyes to the ground. The tattooed man climbed unsteadily upright. His left arm hung loose and deformed at his side. His attacker bounced back to his feet in an unnaturally double-jointed way.

Moving fast, the tattooed man grabbed his opponent in a one-armed bear hug, crushing the smaller man beneath his huge strength. Sam could see the smaller man's ribcage flattening; Dead Eyes didn't seem to mind. Instead, he opened his mouth wide – too wide – and buried his teeth into the skin below the tattooed man's right eye. He thrashed his head around as he tried to rip the flesh from his eye socket.

The big man ignored the assault and continued to squeeze. The most unsettling thing, Sam thought, was that apart from the initial scream by the tattooed man, the two fought in complete silence. They didn't even grunt. Dead Eyes managed to drag his head back, and Sam caught a glimpse of white bone where more flesh had been torn away from the tattooed man's face.

Elastically, Dead Eyes managed to pull his right arm free, and he lanced a finger into the big man's other eye. The tattooed man staggered backwards,

temporarily blinded, but he did not cry out or relax his grip. If anything, he appeared to be squeezing harder, yet somehow Dead Eyes slipped through his grip like a greased balloon and dropped to the ground.

Turning quickly, he threw himself back at the tattooed man. The big man seemed to have regained his sight. He caught Dead Eyes by the throat in his huge right hand and began to mercilessly squeeze the life from his opponent.

Dead Eyes thrashed around, trying to escape. Both his hands lashed out, tearing the painted skin of the solid arm that held him up, causing long, bleeding lacerations. It was not enough; the tattooed man shook him like a terrier with a rat.

It took about seven or eight hard jerks before there was a sharp snap, and Dead Eyes hung lifeless in the victor's hands. The tattooed man casually threw the corpse against a set of railings at one side of the narrow street. It hit limply with a clang and slid to the ground. The tattooed man stumbled to one knee and shook his head again.

Only a few minutes could have passed since Dead Eyes had walked towards Sam, though it seemed longer. He wondered idly what had happened to the first man: the man who had attacked him. The bastard must have run off, Sam thought exhaustedly. He could feel his heart slowing down. The gouts of blood from his throat were becoming sporadic and weak. He knew he was dying. There was a shout from somewhere back towards Quay Street.

The big man got to his feet. Some of his tattoos wriggled up over the wounds on his arms. Others slithered up his neck, over his jawbone and clustered around the orbit of his hurt eye. Seconds later they all snaked away, leaving behind clean, unblemished skin. Sam blinked. It must have been the rain, or maybe a mild hallucination brought on by loss of blood. It couldn't have been real. The big man moved his left arm up and down. He didn't have much of a range of movement. It didn't flop in that unsettling lifeless way anymore, but it looked crooked and lame. His nose was bent almost sideways across one cheek. The kick to his face, Sam thought ... but the injury looked old: healed.

'What is going on here?' a scared voice demanded from behind Sam. The tattooed man turned and ran in the other direction. Sam found himself staring up

into the worried face of the taxi driver. ‘What on earth?’ the man hissed when he saw the state of Sam’s throat. ‘Hang on my friend, I will call an ambulance.’ He pulled out a mobile phone and dialled. Three sharp tones punctuated the storm.

Sam closed his eyes for a second and did as the man said – he tried to hold on. He heard the taxi driver frantically request an ambulance and explain Sam’s injuries. Wet fingers clasped his, and he looked back up into the taxi driver’s concerned eyes. ‘They are on their way,’ he said as he squeezed Sam’s hand. Sam looked over to where Dead Eyes’ body should have been, and he felt a rush of fear when he saw that it was gone. Then he finally lost his battle with consciousness, and the world slipped away.

@amhlaidh

THE SURGE OF MAGIC HAD OCCURRED A FEW MOMENTS AGO. CAM HAD ALMOST forgotten that he was drunk. He stood up and dusted himself off just as Elsa came from the room behind the bar to see what the commotion was.

‘What was that banging?’ she demanded like an angry mother to a brood of naughty children. The few regulars left in the bar stared doggedly into their drinks. ‘Come on, who was it?’

‘He had some kind of fit,’ the shabby man said with a hiccup, pointing at Cam. ‘Fell off his stool again. Probably all that antifreeze he’s been drinking. Rots the brain,’ he added confidently.

‘You’ve been drinking your own antifreeze in here?’ Elsa demanded in a dangerous tone.

‘Of course not,’ Cam said indignantly. ‘I’ve been drinking your antifreeze all night. Look, I fell off my stool again, that’s all. Banged my head a bit. I’m okay.’ Elsa stared at him suspiciously for a few more seconds and then nodded her head. ‘I’ll have another Guinness while you’re here though,’ Cam said. He added

a hasty “please” at Elsa’s venomous glare.

With a fresh drink in front of him, Cam began to wonder about the surge of magic he had felt. Whatever caused it had been very powerful – possibly more powerful than anything left in the world today. As scales of magic went, the wave he had felt was somewhere below Hiroshima, but way above your basic cruise missile. Nowadays, it was rare to feel enough magic to power a spud gun. Oh, there were abilities that still worked, but they tended to be hardwired; natural abilities rather than in-your-face, throw-a-fireball, fly-by-night magic.

Even the natural, ingrained abilities were beginning to fade. The magic was dying. That was a fact known to everybody able to consider such things. So, when a *tsunami* of magical fallout rammed through a bar wall with enough force to knock you off your seat, it was only natural to be curious.

Cam’s head hurt, and he could feel a lump growing. He rubbed it absently as he considered all the other people who would be naturally curious: the two Courts for a start. He thought about going and having a look at what had caused the wave. Thinking of the two rival factions and who, and what, he might run into, Cam reassessed his options and took another drink. Besides, he could already tell that whatever caused the event had made no lasting impression. The magic was still faint and ephemeral; he was still going to die soon.

Glumly, he picked up his drink and downed half of it. Then he belched. He heard the door open behind him but didn’t bother to turn around. He took another drink. As he put his glass back on the bar, Cam realised that the room was quieter than usual.

There was rarely any conversation, but usually you could hear the tap of glasses hitting tables, or the rustle of a newspaper, or the crinkling of plastic bags. There was always an unhealthy cough or a wet sniff, or somebody wandering back from the stinking toilets in a half daze. Now there was nothing – no noise, no movement, not even breathing.

Swivelling in his seat, Cam turned around. A very wet, very naked white man stood just inside the doorway. He was massive, just under seven feet, with heavily muscled arms and shoulders, and a narrow waist. The most immediate thing about the man, apart from his nakedness, was the vast number of green and

blue dragon tattoos that writhed up his legs to his collarbone, wrapping around each other in swirling complexity. His face and head were covered with thick, brown hair that hung to his shoulders in wild, matted disarray.

His beard fell to his chest and appeared to have once been braided; now it was mostly unravelled. His left arm was crooked and deformed. The upper arm bent out at around twenty degrees, giving it the appearance of having three joints. Like a spider. It must have been broken and set badly. His nose looked like it had received similar treatment. It was practically laid across his cheek. Above that shattered mess, two bleak grey eyes scanned the bar from deep sockets, and Cam got the impression the man was searching for something. Then he realised with a flutter of panic that the blunt, harsh face was staring expressionlessly at him.

With a sinking feeling, Cam turned back towards the bar and put his head down. He sensed the tattooed man walking towards him.

‘Nice tats,’ said Tony the ageing biker, from his habitual seat near the door. The tattooed man did not reply. Cam could feel his presence behind him long before a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and spun him around.

Cam looked up into those cold eyes. The tattooed man smelled of mud and rainwater. ‘You are an Elf,’ the big man stated. ‘I must find the Maiden of Earth and Water immediately. You will take me to her.’

‘Will I?’ Cam asked doubtfully.

The tattooed man stared at him. ‘Speak the True Tongue, Elf.’ It was only then that Cam realised the tattooed man was speaking in the ancient language of the Courts.

‘Look,’ Cam said in the True Tongue, ‘I can’t help you. I have no idea who you are ...’

‘I am Grímnir Vafthrúdnir,’ interrupted the tattooed man.

‘Right, that’s wonderful. My name’s Cam. It’s very nice to meet you ...’

‘What in God’s name is going on here?’ Elsa demanded in English.

‘I have no idea,’ Cam said honestly.

‘He’s got no clothes on! Get him out, or I’m calling the police.’

‘Tell the human to shut her mouth, or I will shut it for her,’ Grímnir growled.

Cam looked from Grímnir's flat, bearded face to Elsa's, which was only slightly less flat and bearded, and bright red with fury to boot. He decided he didn't want to get between them.

'What did he say?' Elsa asked dangerously, unable to understand Grímnir's words but getting the gist of them all the same.

'Look,' Cam said in English. 'He's a nut. He's left the hospital. I'll take him back, okay?'

'What language is that?' the shabby man demanded.

Cam glared at him. 'Swedish,' he stated bluntly.

'It's not Swedish. Lived there for a few years. Definitely not Swedish.'

'It's Swedish, you drunken old bastard. Okay?'

'Definitely not Swedish ... it sounds more like archaic Irish Gaelic to me.'

'You speak Gaelic?'

'Of course not,' the shabby man replied. 'Why would I speak Gaelic?'

'Then how do you know ... oh, just fuck off, you dickweed.'

'No need to be like that,' the shabby man mumbled. 'Just trying to help.'

'Get him out of here,' Elsa barked.

'We're going, we're going,' Cam said, standing up and finishing his pint hurriedly.

'Now!' shouted the landlady.

'Okay,' Cam shouted back. He grabbed Grímnir by his huge right bicep – he didn't want to touch the deformed arm – and guided him out into the storm. He was instantly drenched. Grímnir didn't seem to notice the cold or the wet. 'You arsehole,' Cam said to the big man in English.

'What was that?' Grímnir demanded in the True Tongue.

'I said, "What now?"' Cam lied glibly.

'Take me to the Maiden of Earth and Water.'

'I can't,' Cam said. He was thankful for the rain and the wind. There was nobody about, which meant nobody was going to ask any awkward questions about Grímnir's nakedness. 'We need to get you some clothes.'

Grímnir looked down at his body. Then he looked up at the buildings around him. For a second, he looked uncertain. 'You are an Elf, are you not?' he asked.

‘I thought I sensed an Elf, but ...’

‘Yes, I’m an Elf. Not much of one, but still an Elf. Unfortunately.’

‘Where is this place? It is all stone. And what is this hard thing that covers the Earth?’

‘It’s Manchester: the city centre. That’s a road ... look, where exactly are you from?’

‘I have never heard of this Manchester. Where is the nearest Brigante settlement? I will find somebody there who can direct me to the Maiden of Earth and Water.’

‘Brigante? What’s a Brigante? Whatever, let’s get you back to my place. It’s not much, but it’s warm and dry, and I’ve got some tequila, I think. We’ll get you warmed up, and then we’ll talk about our next step, all right?’

Cam tried to tug Grímnir along, but he refused to be budged. ‘Why can I not feel the Earth’s life?’

Cam stopped pulling and sighed. ‘The Earth is dying.’

Grímnir stood very still for a moment as he absorbed this. Then he looked back at Cam. ‘You will take me to the Maiden of Earth and Water?’

‘No. But I know somebody who can point you in the right direction. Let’s get back to my place, out of this rain.’

‘First, I need to fix this,’ Grímnir said, shrugging his bad arm.

‘Fix it? What are you talking about?’ The big man ignored him and walked over to a lamppost. He held the knobby part of his broken arm against it and then slammed his open right palm into his elbow. There was a crunch. Grímnir grunted. His left arm flopped down at a very unnatural angle, clearly broken.

‘Oh my God,’ Cam gulped, fighting down cheap whisky and Guinness. Grímnir reached around and took hold of his left elbow. Then he pulled his upper arm out sharply and began to grind it back up towards his shoulder. It was awful to look at, but it was the sound that made Cam double over and throw up all over the pavement.

‘That’s not fucking normal, man,’ Cam gasped, wiping vomit from his chin. ‘That is not right at all. You sick bastard!’

‘What is the matter? Speak in the True Tongue!’ Cam looked at the naked

man incredulously. He was rotating his left arm at the shoulder, looking for all the world like a Viking strongman warming up to toss a caber, or whatever the hell they did.

‘You are one fucked-up puppy, my man.’

‘The True Tongue!’ Grímnir roared.

‘Fine, I’ll talk in your bloody language,’ Cam said in the True Tongue. ‘You masochistic twatscicle,’ he added in English.

‘What is “masochistic twatscicle”?’ Grímnir asked dangerously, mangling the unfamiliar words.

‘Eh? What? Erm, it means you’re ... erm ... a brave and honoured friend,’ Cam improvised. ‘Yeah, brave and honoured friend, that’s right. Look, I’ve just thrown up a good couple of hours’ solid drinking. I almost feel sober. Come on, I’ll take you back to mine. But no more ... of that ... whatever the fuck that was. And don’t fucking touch me ... I’m not into that shit. Christ, I need a drink.’

‘It was necessary.’

‘It was not necessary. It was the opposite of necessary.’ Cam paused to think. ‘It was unnecessary,’ he finished with a satisfied nod.

Grímnir stared at him silently for a moment. Then he reached up and gripped his broken nose between a thumb and forefinger. He wrenched it back into place with an awful crunch. ‘Oh, you utter, utter bastard!’ Cam groaned and threw up again.

SARAH

THE STORM WAS FINALLY PASSING. IT HAD LASTED ALL NIGHT BUT NOW, WITH dawn only a few hours away, the rain was slackening, and the wind was dying down.

Sarah stood at the bus stop beneath the railway bridge on Fairfield Street with her back to the cold brickwork, one stocking-clad leg set jauntily out ahead

of her, her thin arms crossed beneath her sagging breasts. To her left she could just see Piccadilly Railway Station, a short walk past the edge of the bridge. To her right, the road ran on into the night; the streetlamps struggled to illuminate anything farther than fifty feet.

A gust of cold air leapt up from nowhere, a final throw of the violent weather. Chill currents ran up her ridiculously short skirt, to tickle at her crotch and the inside of her thighs with slimy furtiveness. Sarah cursed the weather for the thousandth time that night and checked her watch. It was nearly five in the morning.

Sighing, she began to trudge away from the stop. Soon people would be getting off at the bus stop to go to work in the city. Others would walk towards the station and the first trains of the morning. Sarah told herself that she was not ashamed of what she did, but deep down at the core of her, that bright little girl who had been loved by her mummy and daddy shuddered.

In the darkness of the red-light district, she didn't care who saw her. The other girls understood, the johns didn't care, and the cops were all right if you didn't take the piss. There was an economy here, and everybody knew their place. When the harsh light of day started creeping in, and normal people began to walk past ... that was when she felt the weight of the years on her shoulders.

She was twenty-four, but she looked forty. An addiction to crack cocaine had melted her flesh away, leaving her gaunt and scrawny. Her hair was lank, and though she had long ago ceased to notice it, she knew that the peculiar foetid stench of homelessness – a combination of mould and stale sweat – clung to her in a miasma. Her teeth were yellow and crooked as were her fingernails, and wrinkles had been carved into her lumpy, broken face through weariness and self-loathing.

Looking down at the ridiculous clothes she was wearing, Sarah stifled a laugh. Knee-high boots – some of the girls called them 'slag wellies' – fishnet stockings, a short denim skirt that flashed her black knickers whenever she walked, a white low-cut top that managed to show some cleavage with the help of a push-up bra, and a denim jacket. Mutton dressed as mutton, she thought to herself wryly. She went back to watching the street.

Two men were walking unsteadily towards the Mayfield Station, the first completely naked and walking with obvious difficulty. Sarah goggled at him, and not even because he was wearing less than her, but because of how tall he was. The giant was bent almost double over the other man, long greasy hair tumbling down to hide his face. The second man was thin and pale, and dressed in a cheap blue suit that was drenched through. The dye appeared to be running. He appeared ... slimy. There was something wrong about him, something that set her flesh to crawling and her hackles twitching on end. The man in the awful suit was supporting the naked giant, helping him along gently. Sarah felt her mouth drop open at the strange sight.

Mayfield Station had been abandoned for years; rough sleepers used it all the time, but she had never seen a naked man get carted in there before. She felt a moment of concern for the giant – what if he had been drugged and was about to get raped or murdered by the other? The feeling seeped away almost as soon as she felt it. She had her own problems.

As they turned into the old station, something the slimy man was holding glinted metallically under the streetlights. Maybe a metal bar, she thought. She couldn't be sure. The two men vanished out of sight before she could figure it out, and Sarah shrugged the mystery away and looked down at her watch again.

Five more minutes, she decided, and then she would go back to her dank little council house and get a couple of hours of sleep. If the drug would allow her. She was going to have to score soon. She watched the old Mayfield Station idly as the seconds ticked past.

The man wearing the blue suit came back out. Sarah watched him curiously. He was very thin, and his head was too big for his body. The misty rain and the darkness made it difficult to make out details, but he moved in a disturbing glide, his pale face floating through the night. Sarah followed him with cautious, narrowed eyes. She could feel a threat emanating from this man. She had learned to pick up the vibes of the people she came across, and something was telling her that this man was to be avoided at all costs.

Glancing down at her watch, she saw that it was time to call it a night anyway. Sarah looked back up. The slimy man had gone. She looked both ways

anxiously, but he was not there. The hackles at the back of her neck were rising again, as if she were being watched. She looked over towards the station – she could go there and be safe amongst the pedestrians. She mentally shook herself. She was being silly. The man had been on the other side of the road and hadn't even seen her.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Sarah turned and began to walk back along Fairfield Street and out of the city. As she went under the bridge, she heard a scuff of feet behind her. Her heart leapt into her throat as she realised that she had made a terrible mistake. She whirled around in time to see the man in the cheap blue suit coming towards her. His eyes bulged from his expressionless face as he bore down on her. Pale eyes. Dead eyes.

A clammy hand clamped over her mouth. An acrid film covered his skin and she could taste it. She began to struggle, and the grip became stronger. She felt another arm wrap around her waist and lift her off her feet. Whoever he was, he was far stronger than he looked – too strong for her. She was pulled quickly across Fairfield Street and over to the Mayfield Station. They passed through a door that had been smashed from its rotten frame, and then they were engulfed in thick, mouldering darkness.

FRIDAY



Samuel

Waking up on an operating table was not a pleasant experience. Sam came around with the metallic tang of his own blood in his nose. A tube had been crammed down the back of his throat and he began to choke. Somebody was doing something to his neck, and the thought of sharp teeth descending on him made him panic. He sat up.

The nurse regulating his breathing screamed. The doctor attempting to sew up the gash in his throat jumped and thrust the needle deep into Sam's collarbone. The sudden pain galvanised Sam, and he lashed out in fury. The flesh of his arm ripped as the tube that attached him to a life-saving drip tore out. His wild swing caught the anaesthetist – who had run in to help restrain him – and sent him tumbling head over heels into a far wall.

Another nurse ran up with a hypodermic needle and thrust it into Sam's leg. The last thing he saw before his vision wavered and dropped away was the plunger being depressed. As he passed out, he could hear somebody shouting.

WHEN HE NEXT WOKE UP, HE WAS LYING IN A HOSPITAL BED. ENOUGH LIGHT

filtered in through the thin blinds for Sam to make out that he was in a ward with three more beds. The other beds were occupied, and he could hear various machines clicking, whirring, and beeping over the occasional snore or groan. He became aware of a tube in his throat again and he pulled it out, gagging as he did. There were tubes in his arms. He left them where they were. Struggling, he sat up and felt at his throat. It was bound up in thick bandages. They felt constricting, and the flesh beneath them itched furiously. He felt weak and thirsty.

Somebody had left a small metal box with buttons on it next to his hand. One of them had a small picture of a bell on it, and he pressed it a couple of times. While he waited, he rubbed at the bandages in an attempt to scratch his neck. It didn't work. He shifted around a bit as he tried to make himself comfortable in the crisp sheets and the sterile-smelling pillows.

Just as he was getting the pillows right, a nurse walked into the room. She came over to him with a tired smile on her face. 'Well, if it isn't our John Doe, back from the dead.' Sam tried to speak but found that his throat wasn't working. The nurse looked at him sympathetically. Then she held out a notepad and a pencil. 'Your throat was badly damaged. I'll let the doctor speak with you about that. For now, why don't you write down your name.'

Sam wrote – **where's my wallet.**

'You didn't have one on you when you came in. That's why we don't know who you are. The police took your fingerprints, but you've obviously been a good boy because they didn't get a result.' Sam vaguely remembered Dead Eyes going through his pockets. What a bastard, he thought to himself. Sam wrote his name and date of birth on the pad, and the nurse read it.

'Sam. I've always thought that was a lovely name. My granddad was a Sam,' she said fondly.

Sam gestured for the pad and when he got it back, he wrote – **does my wife know I'm here?**

'We didn't know who to contact, honey,' said the nurse gently. 'Put down her details, and we'll get in touch with her straight away.' Sam complied, writing down Tabby's name and both the home number and her mobile. At the end, he

scrawled – **what happened to me?**

‘From what I can gather, the police think you were attacked. You poor thing. Would you like a drink? We’ll have to put the tube back in if you do – I don’t think you’ll be able to swallow.’

Yes.

The nurse went and got a drink of water in a plastic beaker. She reached for the tube, but Sam waved her away. She handed him the beaker with the expression of a schoolteacher who was about to let a pupil make a mistake, confident that this was the best way for them to learn. When Sam swallowed the water without help, she arched an eyebrow questioningly.

‘Well, that’s good Sam. That’s very good. The doctor didn’t think you’d be swallowing on your own for a week at least. I’ll go and phone your wife.’ Sam watched her go, clutching the pad and pencil as if it were the only thing keeping him afloat in a violent sea.

MARK

BIRDSONG WOKE MARK. OPENING HIS EYES, HE STARED BLANKLY AT THE CEILING above his bed. As usual, he gained consciousness immediately. There was no half-awake, half-asleep blariness, nor did he feel any need to roll over and doze for a few extra minutes. There was no confusion from the last dream of the night because he didn’t dream. Mark knew exactly where he was and who he was.

Sitting up, he rubbed some grit from the corner of his eye. His room was dark and gloomy, and smelled of stale breath and night sweat. ‘Windows,’ he said out loud. His voice was clear and strong against the twittering and chattering of the birds outside.

The darkness faded like miraculous dawn as the current died in the electrochromic glass of the huge windows that covered one entire wall of the bedroom. The glass went from solid black to clear crystal in a few short seconds,

and bright sunlight flooded the room. Mark did not blink nor shield his eyes. He felt his pupils constrict. He stared out at the skeletal winter treetops beyond the window.

Stretching, he looked around, his gaze checking the room out of habit. Everything was in place. The huge king-sized bed he was resting on dominated the centre of the room, its headboard pushed up against the middle of one long wall. Its white duvet and sheets were unruffled, except for where he had pushed the cover back to sit up. The pillows were in place, and only the one on which he had laid his head was indented. He did not move around when he slept.

The dark wooden floors were clear and shone with polish. The room was painted a pristine white and it was massive, though the furniture was minimal. It gave the place an impersonal, almost forlorn feel. Opposite the bed, a vast plasma screen television hung on the wall. Beneath it, a stainless-steel stand held various electronic items – the latest multimedia station, a stereo, and all the other modern essentials. Mark used the television for the news. The rest of the gadgets he rarely touched.

Another white wall stretched out opposite the windows. An antique wooden wardrobe and a chest of drawers, both the same shade as the wood floor, were backed up against it. To their right, a big double door, which also matched the floor, was closed. Beside the bed there was a small table with a lamp on it. On the other side of the bed another smaller door was also closed.

There were no pictures, neither personal nor professional, nor were there any ornaments nor other personal effects.

‘Television,’ Mark said. The big plasma screen shimmered to life. The BBC News channel was on. The story was about the Middle East, and Mark stopped listening. Instead, he read the ticker tape of headlines at the bottom of the screen. There was nothing about his work last night. The body of the woman had consumed itself, and the evidence of his evening’s hunting had vanished in a matter of minutes. He knew the creature would not be missed. Not by anything human, anyway.

‘Off,’ he barked. The television went dead. ‘Phone: Sergei,’ he said. Hidden speakers clicked on and he heard a dial tone flicker to life. There was a

discordant series of beeps as a number was dialled and then a ringing noise.

‘Mr. Jones,’ a sharp, European voice answered from the speakers. ‘How can I help you this morning, Sir?’

‘How is she?’ Mark demanded without preamble.

‘She is fine, Sir. She got home and went to bed. We kept surveillance on her. She is perfectly safe.’

‘Twenty-four seven,’ Mark said. ‘I want her protected twenty-four seven.’

‘Yes Sir, there is a team with her constantly.’

‘And they remain hidden.’

‘She is blissfully unaware of our presence or your interest, Sir.’

‘Good. You remember the date?’

‘Yes Sir. Next Monday.’

‘I will speak with you tomorrow morning. If anything changes in the meantime, you are to contact me immediately.’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Goodbye, Sergei.’ Hearing the coded phrase, the computer system that ran his home waited for a second in case there was any reply and then hung up. Mark walked naked to the door beside his bed and moved through into an immaculate *en-suite* bathroom, where he went through his morning ablutions. When he was finished, he took a thick white robe that hung on the back of the bathroom door and shrugged it on. Then he went back through his bedroom and out onto a wide landing.

Walking purposefully, he made his way past several rooms along the mezzanine level until he reached another set of double doors. Opening them, he stepped into another large space. This room had not been painted nor papered, and the original brickwork was exposed. Another series of huge windows dominated one wall, flooding the room with bright light. There was nothing of the previous night’s storms in the clear blue winter sky, which spread azure and perfect towards a distant horizon.

‘Windows,’ Mark said. Two of the huge windows swung open automatically, and a gust of cold air washed into the room. Mark hung his robe on a hook near the door and enjoyed the goose bumps that rose across his chest, shoulders, and

arms. One side of the room contained a spartan gymnasium – a running machine, some free weights, and a punchbag that hung from a thick beam in the ceiling. The rest of the room was empty, with the same hardwood flooring as the bedroom.

The only other objects in the room were two swords, both resting on granite plinths in opposite corners of the room. The weapons were in their sheaths. They were each four feet long: three in the blade and one in the hilt. Though hidden by their sheaths, it was clear the blades were slightly curved.

The sword closest to the window had a deep red sheath and a white ivory handle. The other sword, which had been placed as far from the window as possible, was jet black. Its hilt was wrapped in black cloth to provide a firm grip.

After a series of warm-up exercises and stretches, Mark went over to the sword with the red sheath and drew it. He examined the blade, which was plain, unsharpened steel, for any flaws. Satisfied, he went through a series of complicated practice moves.

For an hour, the blade flickered and spun in Mark's expert hands. To an untrained eye, it might have looked like a dance, so swift and perfect were the *kata*. Sweat soon glistened on his naked body.

Re-sheathing the sword, Mark walked back across the floor and put it back on its plinth. Then he worked the bag for twenty minutes before jogging ten kilometres on the running machine. He warmed down with some free weights.

Mark put his robe back on and walked to the kitchen, a sparkling affair in black granite and stainless steel. He ate mechanically. Like sleep, Mark didn't really need to eat, but it could cause discomfort if he didn't for any length of time. He ate a bowl of cereal and then went back upstairs for a second shower.

As he towelled himself off in the bedroom, Mark said, 'Phone: Jason.'

'Mr. Jones?'

'Jason.'

'I assume last night's ... endeavour ... was a success.'

'Yes.'

'The cyanide worked?'

'Yes.'

‘Well, that’s good to know. I’ll make a note ...’ Jason’s voice trailed off, and Mark thought he could hear the vague scratching of a pen.

‘What about the other target?’ Mark asked impatiently.

‘The portfolio is almost complete. The pattern didn’t change yesterday. I’ll pick up surveillance this morning. From what I’ve seen, the extermination will not be a problem.’

‘One more day. If nothing changes, I’ll begin preparations tomorrow.’

‘No problem. I still can’t believe you injected yourself with that stuff. Even you can’t predict how your system will react to something like that. It was dangerous.’

‘There was no danger. Goodbye, Jason.’ The phone went dead. ‘Phone: office,’ Mark said. He pulled on a pair of tracksuit bottoms as the phone rang. When it was answered, he began the business of the day.

@amhlaidh

FRIDAY MORNINGS WERE NOT THE TRADITIONAL TIME FOR HANGOVERS. CAM, ON the other hand, was much the worse for wear most mornings. It was a funny thing, but despite his inhuman resistance to poisons, Cam always suffered from alcoholic excess.

When he was in a philosophical mood, he pondered over whether it was psychosomatic – that he believed he deserved to suffer so much, his body just said to hell with it and started driving metaphorical nails through his temples. Since he had finished off the best part of a bottle of tequila before retiring last night, Cam’s hangover was pretty bad. He groaned and wrenched a gummy eye open. Grímnir was standing over him. He had a hand on Cam’s shoulder and Cam realised that he was shaking him.

‘Get away from me,’ he croaked in the True Tongue. ‘I told you I’m not into

that shit.'

'It is light outside. You promised me you would be up at first light to help me find the Maiden of Earth and Water.'

'I promised you that? When?'

'About an hour ago, when you finished that bottle of sour mead.'

'Sour mead? You mean tequila?' Cam realised what Grímnir had just said. 'An hour ago? Sweet Jesus, you bearded loon. I'm dying here!' he spat in English.

'Speak in the True Tongue,' Grímnir demanded.

'Blow me,' Cam replied. Then he turned and buried his face in an evil-smelling pillow. Strong hands closed around his torso, and he was wrenched physically from his bed. Grímnir held him under the armpits and began to shake him like a rag doll.

'Oh fuck,' Cam gasped queasily.

'Speak in the True Tongue!' Grímnir shouted. His bellow rang around Cam's skull, threatening to split it open. Cam brought both hands around in desperation and slapped them around Grímnir's ears. The big man grunted and then grinned. 'Yes, little one, that was a bit more like how one from the Courts should behave – strongly! I almost felt the blow.'

'Put me down,' Cam gasped.

'I will not, until you agree to fulfil your end of the bargain and take me to the Maiden of Earth and Water.'

'Okay, okay ... just put me down.'

Grímnir dropped him and Cam ran for the bathroom. He made it just in time. Dropping to his knees, he threw up violently into the toilet bowl.

Grímnir followed him in. 'Why are you ill? Alcohol does not affect any Elf I ever met.'

'Well no wonder the fairy folk are all so fucking cheerful then,' Cam said bitterly. 'I don't know why it gets me like this, it just does. You were lucky I didn't throw up in your beard, you cock-rocket. I'm going to take a ...' he looked for the word in the True Tongue and couldn't find it. Cam shrugged. 'I'm going to take a shower,' he said in English.

Grímnir looked at him dangerously. ‘You said you would take me to the Maiden of Earth and Water.’

‘I will,’ he said, switching back to the True Tongue. ‘But first I have to bathe, and we’ve got to go and get you some clothes from somewhere.’ In English, he added, ‘And then I’m going to get a drink.’

Samuel

‘OH, SWEETHEART,’ TABBY SAID AS SOON AS SHE WALKED IN THE ROOM. SAM felt a smile spread across his face when he saw his wife. She came straight over to his bed, leant down, and kissed him gently on the lips. Then she took a step backwards and surveyed him with concern.

Sam wrote on his notepad – **Hi, Tabby.**

‘Oh, Sam ... your poor neck.’ She reached out a tentative hand and brushed the bandages.

Sam wrote – **It’s okay. It looks a lot worse than it is. Have you spoken with a doctor?**

Tabby read the note. ‘No, I came straight here. When they called me ...’ she choked up for a second. ‘You had me so worried.’

Sam looked at his wife and felt a swell of affection deep in his chest. She was a petite woman, only pushing five-feet-four in heels, which she rarely wore. Though short, she had a perfect figure, and long black hair that fell to the small of her back. Tabby spent hours caring for her hair, and it was so glossy and sleek, it almost glowed in the morning sun that shone through the open curtains. Her eyes were a deep blue that dazzled from the pale white skin of her face. She had a wide mouth, with full lips that were wont to spread up into an infectious grin. She was not smiling now, though – her forehead was furrowed in a concerned frown, and her lips were pursed and tight.

‘What did this to you?’ Tabby asked as she sat down on the edge of his bed.

Sam wrote – **I don’t know, I was drunk.**

‘You idiot,’ Tabby said without heat. She reached out and stroked his cheek. Sam felt a tingle where she touched him, and he reached up with his own hand to grip her fingers tenderly. Sam remembered the strange naked man perfectly and was slightly ashamed about keeping it from Tabby; he just couldn’t think of a way to explain it to her without sounding crazy. The last thing he wanted was to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Movement at the door made Sam look up. A tall, harassed-looking man in his late thirties strode in. He attempted a smile at Sam and Tabby, but the effort seemed a bit flat. Sam could see the tiredness in his eyes. ‘Hi, I’m Doctor Jackman,’ he said. With more vague smiles in their direction, Jackman walked over to Sam’s chart and flicked through it. His eyebrows arched in surprise, and he looked at Sam. ‘You’re swallowing? Already? There must be some mistake ...’

Sam wrote – **No mistake.** His pen strokes were clumsy because Jackman’s fingers were probing at his throat.

‘What’s wrong with him swallowing?’ Tabby asked worriedly.

Jackman looked at her with a slightly confused expression on his face. ‘Wrong? Nothing’s wrong, it’s very, very good news.’ He turned and addressed Sam. ‘I’ve reviewed your notes. When you were brought in last night, Mr. Autumn, they honestly didn’t think you were going to survive.’ Jackman ignored Tabby’s gasp of shock, and for a moment Sam felt like throttling the man for scaring her. ‘The damage was extensive and severe to the arteries and veins, and to the larynx. The carotid artery had been nicked, and the jugular vein was severed. You lost so much blood ... well frankly, it was a miracle you lived to get to the ICU. You should have bled out on the street in moments.’

Sam wrote – **I put pressure on the wound.**

‘Quite,’ Jackman said doubtfully. ‘It’s all by-the-by anyway. You lived. If you don’t believe in God, then now’s a good time to start, because there is no medical explanation for why you’re with us today.’

‘Well he is, so what’s wrong with that?’ Tabby asked defensively. Sam

squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Jackman looked at the two of them, his tired eyes perplexed. Then he seemed to understand. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Autumn, you have to forgive me. I’ve been working for almost fourteen hours ... I don’t mean to frighten you. This really is genuinely good news. If I am a little blunt, then I apologise.’ He turned to Sam. ‘I don’t mean to scare you or your wife, but your survival really is a one in a million shot.’

‘The surgeon assured me that your operation went very well indeed, despite the slight hiccup with the anaesthetic.’ He looked at Tabby. ‘He woke up on the operating table, I’m afraid. Even so, the tissue damage to the muscles of your throat meant that we anticipated swallowing would be a problem for a while. That you are already swallowing on your own is yet another cause for celebration.’

Jackman sighed. ‘Unfortunately, it is not all good news. Your recovery is remarkable, but your larynx was irreparably damaged. I’m afraid that it is very unlikely that you will ever speak again.’

They sat in silence for a while, Jackman in obvious discomfort, Sam and Tabby in shock. Eventually Sam picked up the pad and pencil again.

Sam wrote – **Unlikely?**

Jackman sighed again. ‘More like impossible.’ He let that sink in. ‘I really am very sorry. If you have any questions, ask one of the nurses to page me and I’ll be with you as soon as I can. I’ll check on you tomorrow, regardless – if your condition remains the same, then I’ll happily discharge you.’

Tabby was crying. Sam wrote – **I want to go home now.**

‘I really think that it would be best if you remained here overnight,’ Jackman said. ‘There may be complications we don’t know about yet.’

Sam wrote – **I want to discharge myself.**

Jackman shrugged, clearly not bothered enough to argue his case. ‘I’ll have a nurse bring you the necessary paperwork to sign. I have an outpatients’ clinic tomorrow and I think I can find you a morning appointment. You can go home on the condition that you make that appointment. Okay?’

Sam wrote – **Yes.**

Jackman walked to the door and then turned again. ‘I really am very sorry,’ he reiterated before turning and walking out without waiting for a reply.

MARK

MARK WAS IN THE GARAGE WHEN HIDDEN SPEAKERS TRILLED TO INDICATE THAT he had an incoming call. He let it ring a few times as he looked around at the vehicles. There was a stripped Harley Davidson lounging in one corner, its exposed chrome pipes gleaming in the bright spotlights.

A glistening blue Corvette ZR1 was parked next to it, and next to the Corvette was a silver Aston Martin DB7. On the other side of the garage squatted a monstrous Lamborghini Reventón, in black. Its angular lines and sleek bonnet promised 650 horsepower, which could get it up to 210 miles per hour; so fast, the makers of the car had thought it prudent to include a G-force metre on the instrument panel.

Incongruously, an old Ford Escort was parked next to the sports car. It looked tiny and out of place amongst the exalted company around it. It was an old model, and its dark blue paintwork was scratched, the bodywork dented in places. Mark reached out a hand and stroked its bonnet. For some reason, he felt more attached to this old piece of junk than any of the other cars. Despite its beat-up appearance, the car was scrupulously maintained. It had never let Mark down, and since he only used the car when he wanted to look inconspicuous, which was most of the time if he was honest, he had grown attached to it.

All his cars had custom satellite navigation systems, run-flat tyres, bullet-proof glass, automatic fire extinguishers, and explosion-resistant fuel tanks. Each of them also had a stainless-steel case containing some basic medical supplies, two Browning Hi-Power 9mm semi-automatic pistols and ammunition, an L85A2 assault rifle and ammunition, a change of clothing, grenades, flares, and night vision equipment. Mark liked to be prepared.

The telephone stopped ringing. Mark waited. A few seconds later it began again. 'Phone,' Mark said with a sigh.

'Mr. Jones?'

'Yes.'

'It's Jason.'

'I know.'

'Oh.' There was a pause.

'What is it, Jason?'

'Oh, right, yes. The portfolio ... it's changed.'

Mark stayed silent for a moment as he absorbed the information. 'How?' he asked eventually.

'Another target has been introduced.'

'Describe it.'

'A large male with a beard. Very powerfully built. He appears to be covered in tattoos.'

'Where did it come from?'

'I don't know – he was with Target One this morning, when observations were resumed through the hidden cameras in his flat.'

'What do we know about it?'

'Nothing yet. From what we have seen so far, the two of them don't get along very well. Target One seems to be beholden to Target Two in some way, and Target Two seems contemptuous of Target One.'

'That does not surprise me – from what I have gathered, Target One is a wretch.'

'You shouldn't underestimate them, Sir. We are used to hunting Ifrit: they remain relatively common. But the other three races have disappeared from our world. You said yourself that you haven't seen anything like Target One for a while, and I think Target Two is different again. For two species we thought pretty much extinct to surface at the same time ... and in each other's company ... well, I think it might pay to be prudent, is all.'

Mark did not answer straight away. When he eventually spoke, his voice was resolute. 'Very well, we'll put our plans back for a day. Watch them, see what

they do. I want to know where they go and who they see. And I want to know about the people they meet as well.'

'It'll take a lot of resources – I'll have to bring in some more people. Specialists. They won't be cheap.'

Jason couldn't see Mark's smile as he surveyed the garage full of expensive machinery. 'Money has not been a problem for a very long time. Do it.'

'Yes Sir.'

'Goodbye, Jason.'

The phone line went dead. Mark patted the bonnet of the Ford Escort thoughtfully. Then he walked back towards the door that led into the house proper.

ROWAN

IT WAS ONE OF THE FEW DAYS IN THE YEAR THAT ROWAN WAS LIKELY TO HAVE completely to himself, and he intended to take full advantage of it. Returning home late last night for the first time in eight months, Rowan had pumped the heating up to full and cooked himself a spartan dinner of omelette and baked beans before going to bed. He had slept like a log.

Waking up at half eight was a lie-in for him. He stretched beneath the soft sheets and yawned loudly. Then he simply lay there, enjoying the sensation of not having to get up. Eventually, he rolled out of bed and went through some gentle stretching exercises, followed by a gruelling series of callisthenics. Sweating but happy, Rowan examined himself naked in the full-length mirror attached to the wardrobe and was pleased with what he saw.

Close-cropped black hair covered the top of his head. When it got longer it gathered an unruly curl, but cut close to the scalp it remained neat and tidy. He

had a broad and friendly face bronzed from constant outdoor work. A wide mouth with slightly-too-thick lips stretched across it. Laughter lines creased the corners, and when he grinned, a set of crooked teeth greeted the world. The left incisor and canine had been knocked out in a training exercise and ever the pragmatist, Rowan had replaced them with titanium. They glittered menacingly in the sunlight that came through the bedroom window. Combined with a squat, twice-broken nose, the teeth gave him a villainous appearance. He was an ugly customer, he thought to himself. Except for the eyes – his eyes were the deepest blue.

In stark contrast to his face, he had the body of an Adonis. Flawless, milk-white skin covered a trim frame. He was not tall – only five-feet-eight inches – but his shoulders were wide, and his biceps bulged. His waist was narrow, and above it, a solid six-pack was etched across his belly. Thick thighs and calves, made for running long distances, were complemented by a pair of shins deeply scarred from repeated strikes to a hard punchbag. Looking down at his big tanned hands, Rowan saw the thick scar tissue over the knuckles, which had been generated from years of boxing.

An old tattoo was etched into the flesh above his heart on one meaty pectoral. It said *Royal Marine Commando*, and Rowan felt a surge of pride when he looked at it. His mum had been so proud when he had gone off to RM Condor with his brand-new Green Beret. He felt a moment of melancholy. His mother had died of breast cancer four years ago, when he was twenty-four, and afterwards his father had just given up. He had followed her within the year: lung cancer. Rowan shrugged the thoughts away.

Eight months away with his unit, and finally he had been granted some leave. It was only a week, but he intended to make the most of it by doing absolutely nothing. He would get in touch with his sister and see if she wanted to meet up. He frowned to himself. His leave had come through at short notice, and he hadn't had chance to let her know he was coming back. In truth, he simply hadn't thought of it. 'I'll do it later,' Rowan said to himself under his breath.

He decided to go and get some breakfast first. A big, unhealthy holiday breakfast, he thought to himself with a boyish grin. Slipping into a pair of jeans,

a t-shirt, and a thick anorak, Rowan made his way to the front door. A pair of big military boots sat by the door. He pulled them on and let himself out.

The sky was clear and blue. The air was crisp and cold. Rowan inhaled, enjoying the sting at the back of his nose from the chill, but not liking the smell of exhaust fumes that came with it. He looked back at the house. It was where he had grown up, a narrow two up, two down in Stockport. His sister had married and moved out shortly before his dad had died. He was glad the old man had seen her wedding; it had made him happy, and he had even rallied for a week afterwards.

Obviously, his daughter's happiness had only been a short stay of execution, and he had died a month later. Since then, the house had been empty. Rowan stayed there on a *de facto* basis. Nobody minded; neither sibling wanted to sell the place.

Turning, Rowan dug his hands into his pockets and walked up to the high street. He went into a greasy spoon that had existed in the same spot for well over a decade and ordered a full English breakfast. It came with a milky cup of tea into which he poured three sugars. A local paper had been left on the table next to him; he read absently about a burst water main that was causing havoc in the city centre, and of a man who had been found nearby with his throat torn out.

Rowan tutted at the story. He could not comprehend how the country had got itself into a position where thugs could go around tearing people up like that with impunity. His life was simpler, he knew. If he had an enemy, he did his best to kill him. That was his job; after a tour of duty in Afghanistan, it came naturally. Returning to the world like this was always a bit of a wrench.

Though not particularly tall, Rowan was still a big lad and he tended to attract the sort of idiot who liked to test themselves against him. Sometimes he had to remember not to hurt them. It was far more difficult to simply walk away when people got antagonistic with him, especially with his training. He was never tempted though. His philosophy was simple: why ruin my life over some drunken shitehead who'll probably do the job for me within a year or two anyway?

It was an easy division to make. When he was in uniform, he was lethal and

uncompromising. When he was in civvies, he was as gentle as a kitten. It worked out.

Besides, after a few days in a city like Manchester, he couldn't wait to get back to his unit. Military life was so much more ... wholesome. He finished his breakfast and read the rest of the paper. The story about the man who had been attacked kept coming back to him, and he shook his head in disgust. They should find people like the one who had done that and put a bullet in their brainpan. No questions, no forgiveness, no rehabilitation. An eye for an eye, a throat for a throat, and if the bleeding-heart liberal bullshit contingent didn't like it, they could go in a shallow grave with the rapists and murderers.

Still, he thought as he looked up at the clear winter's sky, it wasn't his problem and it never would be, unless martial law was enforced. If that happened, the scum would have a real wake-up call. He tried to imagine a bunch of spotty hoodies with knives up against 45 Commando, and the image made him grin. Whistling a little tune, Rowan walked back to his house.

@amhlaidh

SHOPLIFTING WAS EASY WHEN YOU WERE AN ELF.

One of the innate talents Cam's race possessed was the ability to cast a Glamour over people. A hundred years ago, a single Elf could beguile an entire village without much effort. Now, Cam strained to confuse the five people in the sports shop for the few minutes necessary to go behind the counter, pick up a plastic bag, and then stuff it full of extra-large tracksuits and t-shirts. A member of staff wandered out of the storeroom, and Cam slipped in through the closing door. He grabbed a couple of pairs of black trainers out of some boxes marked size fourteen and shoved them in with the other clothing.

Cam walked out of the shop, ignoring the urgent beeping from the security

equipment at the exit, and waited. After a few seconds the alarm stopped, and Cam let the Glamour slip away. An attractive shop assistant blinked a couple of times in confusion and then spotted Cam through the open door. She smiled uncertainly. He smiled back and she blushed furiously.

Grinning to himself, Cam walked away. He was carrying six bags from three different shops. One of them contained a sturdy brown leather jacket and a pair of stylish jeans for Grímnir. Three more contained a vast amount of expensive underwear. He had also quickly nipped into an Internet café to check on something Grímnir had said, and then picked up a bag full of meat from a nearby supermarket – mainly quality steaks and roasts. The last bag held his most recent acquisitions, again for Grímnir.

On the way back to his flat, Cam stopped in a few pubs he knew well and sold two bags of underwear and the bag of meat. Pocketing two hundred pounds, he whistled as he walked the last few hundred feet to his flat and let himself in. The morning's thieving had almost cured his hangover, and Cam was feeling almost positive about his situation.

Grímnir was sitting on the sofa, staring at the television in amazement. Cam threw the three bags at him. 'Put some clothes on,' he said as he walked into the kitchen and searched for a drink. Finding nothing, he cursed himself for not picking up a bottle of tequila at the supermarket. He came back outside to find Grímnir going through the underwear in confusion.

'What are these for?' he asked.

'Underwear,' Cam said. He walked over and picked up some items. 'These are socks. They go over your feet. Then you put the trainers on. No, not yet – put the jeans on first, you dickweasel.'

Eventually Grímnir was showered and dressed. It didn't surprise Cam that he went for the leather jacket and jeans instead of the tracksuits. He looked like a leather kind of guy. Cam watched as Grímnir conscientiously braided his beard and tied his hair back with a leather thong he had found from somewhere. When he was done, Cam had to admit he didn't look half bad. His huge physique bulged through the jacket, and his grey eyes were like flint.

'Now, take me to the Maiden of Earth and Water,' Grímnir demanded.

‘I told you, I can’t.’ He held up a hand to stop Grímnir’s protests before they started. ‘But I know somebody who might be able to help. Come on.’

The two men walked out of the flat. ‘Where are we going?’ Grímnir asked.

‘Back into town. Into Manchester. It’s not far.’

Cam lived just outside of the city centre, in Salford. His flat was in one of the poorer areas not far from the university, but he liked that. Nobody paid any attention to him, and he found he could lose himself in the transient population. The walk into Manchester took twenty minutes. By the time they got there, it was almost noon. Cam led them through the busy lunchtime crowds, to a pub near the town hall.

‘One of the better things the humans have come up with in the last few years is a relaxation of the licensing laws – some pubs are open most of the day. Are you hungry?’

‘Yes,’ Grímnir growled. ‘But my stomach is not my priority.’

‘Yes, I know. The Maiden of Earth and Water. I’ll get on that as soon as I can. First, we might as well eat, huh? This place does a nice all-day breakfast. My treat ... no, don’t thank me ...’ Before Grímnir could object, Cam walked into the dark pub. After a moment, he heard the big man follow him.

They were soon settled at a seat by the window. Cam had a pint of Guinness in front of him and a whisky chaser. Grímnir was staring at a glass full of bitter. Cam had decided that he looked like a bitter drinker. A man sat close by, reading a paper and drinking a coffee. Cam dismissed him. Otherwise the pub was empty.

‘What is it?’ Grímnir asked suspiciously.

‘Beer. Drink up.’

‘I do not want beer, I want ...’

‘The Maiden of Earth and Water ... yes, I know. Listen, you are obviously not from around here. The fact is, I get the feeling that without me, you’re going to be quite lost. Am I right?’

‘I do not need you.’

‘Good, that’s great. Off you go then and leave me in peace.’ Grímnir stared at him furiously, and his fists clenched.

Cam wagged a finger at him. ‘Ah, ah,’ he said in a chastising tone. ‘One thing you’ll find out around here is that senseless acts of random violence don’t go down too well. Settle down, and I’ll tell you what’s going to happen.’ Cam waited.

After a moment, Grímnir visibly relaxed. Cam sighed in relief. ‘We are going to eat. Then we’re going to have a few drinks because God help me, I need them. Then you’re going to tell me exactly what’s going on. Once you’ve done that, I’m going to make a phone call, and I’m going to tell them what you told me. Then, I imagine some very important and humourless people are going to show up and take you off my hands. Okay?’

Grímnir’s hard eyes locked on to Cam’s. They bored into him, full of suppressed rage. ‘Okay,’ Grímnir said.

‘Good, drink up.’ Cam swallowed the shot of whisky and gasped as it seared down his throat. Then he picked up the pint of Guinness and took a long swallow. Grímnir raised his own glass to his lips and took a sip. His eyes widened a little, and he took a longer drink.

‘This is good,’ he said. ‘Not as good as mead, but good.’ He took another swallow.

‘I knew you’d be a bitter drinker,’ Cam said glumly. ‘It’s written all over you.’

Samuel

SAM TOOK THE PILLS WITH WATER. THERE WERE TWO OF THEM, AND THEY WERE sour and gritty. Tabby sat at the kitchen table, reading the instructions. Sam went over and wordlessly hugged her. Her hand came up absently to stroke his forearm.

‘It’ll be okay, Love,’ she said. ‘It’s just a precaution, like the nurse said.’ Sam

nodded and went to sit down opposite his wife. He picked up the bottles and read the labels listlessly. The first was Truvada, and he was to take one tablet a day. The second was Kaletra, which he had to take twice a day. The nurse had explained that he needed to take the appropriate drugs every twelve hours, without fail. If he didn't, the amount of medication in his blood supply would drop to a level where it would no longer be beneficial.

Together, the drugs worked to inhibit a certain protein that the HIV virus required to reproduce itself. The four-week regimen would mean that hopefully any small amounts of the virus that might have transmitted to him through the bite, would die without being able to replicate.

The nurse had reassured him that it was practically impossible to catch the disease from saliva – a person would need to drink about four gallons of spit before they were even at risk. But if it was a homeless person and they were malnourished, the chances of bleeding gums were high enough for Sam to be put on post-exposure prophylaxis, just to be on the safe side. He was to be tested for hepatitis as well.

Just to be on the safe side, Sam thought to himself wryly. He was looking at AIDS, for God's sake; no matter how many times he was told he had a practically zero percent chance of being infected, it was a terrifying thought.

Tabby could obviously read his expression. 'Don't worry; the hospital's just covering its back. You'll be fine.' Sam wanted to bawl at her that it wasn't going to be fine, that some psychopath had attacked him in the dark and bitten his throat out, that he was never going to speak again, and that he might have a virus that would kill him in slow agony. But he couldn't, because his larynx was gone.

The anger disappeared as fast as it had come on him. He reached out and squeezed Tabby's hand, gazed into her cornflower-blue eyes, and smiled reassuringly.

She smiled back. 'We'll get through this, Sam. We'll get through it together like we always do. I love you so much, and I'm not going to let a few little things like this get in the way of our life. Okay?'

He nodded, and an enormous rush of love surged through him. He did not deserve this kind, beautiful woman.

They had met through a mutual friend at a party back at university. At first, Sam had barely noticed the doll-like girl who was hanging around the kitchen with a few of her friends. Sam had been desperately trying to impress a young woman, whose name he could no longer recall.

He winced now at how he had spent the better part of the evening running back and forth to the kitchen, preparing the object of his desire complicated cocktails from a small book she had found on a coffee table. All the while, she had laughed and joked with her friends. How pathetic he must have looked to the rest of the partygoers.

Eventually she went off with a tall young man with a rapacious gleam in his eyes, and Sam was left, dejected and drunk, with his cocktail shakers and a fridge full of beer. Tabby came over to pick up a bottle of vodka and then asked him to move from in front of the fridge. He stepped aside so she could get some ice. He could still remember their conversation as she made her drink.

‘She’s not worth it, you know,’ Tabby said.

‘What?’

‘She’s not worth it. I’m on the same course as her. She’s not very bright, and the rumour is that the only reason she’s not been kicked out is because she slept with our tutor. I kind of believe it – apparently, she’s slept with everybody else.’

‘What’s it got to do with you?’ Sam snapped angrily.

Tabby’s face set in a firm expression. ‘Absolutely nothing, but she’s not a nice person, and it seems a shame that you’d let somebody like that get to you. She’s a slut.’

‘That’s true – but she’s a slut who won’t sleep with me,’ he said dejectedly. ‘What does that make me?’

Tabby laughed. The sound was bright and rich in the close kitchen. Sam couldn’t help but smile. ‘Why don’t you set your sights a little higher? You never know what might happen.’ She touched his upper arm gently, smiled at him, and then turned to walk away.

‘Wait!’ Sam shouted. She turned back to face him. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Tabitha,’ she replied.

‘I’ll see you later, Tabby?’

She just winked and walked away.

Sam still smiled when he thought about that meeting. She had seemed so assured, so totally in control of what was going on. They had started seeing each other soon after that, and Sam had been amazed to find that Tabby was a quiet, shy person. It was only after almost a year of dating that she finally admitted she had been attracted to him for a while before she spoke to him that night, and that it had not been a chance encounter.

‘I saw you there and my friends practically pushed me over to you. I didn’t know what to say. I don’t even drink vodka,’ she had confided one evening in bed. ‘I just wanted you to notice me.’

‘Well, you certainly succeeded,’ he had said and kissed her. That had been the night he had first told her that he loved her. Looking over at her now, all he wanted to do was tell her again, but he couldn’t. He looked around for a pen and some paper, but there wasn’t any to hand.

The phone rang, and Sam automatically went and picked it up. There was a moment of silence as Sam, with a sinking feeling, realised he could not speak to the person at the other end of the phone.

‘Hello,’ said a voice. It was Mr. Milton, Sam’s boss. Wordlessly, he handed the phone to Tabby, who was smiling at him ruefully.

‘Hello,’ she said. Sam listened to the one-sided conversation. ‘Oh, Mr. Milton ... Yes, he is here ... I’m sorry, we quite forgot ... He is here, yes ... No, I’m afraid he can’t speak right now ... No, you misunderstand. He can’t speak. He’s physically incapable. With everything that’s happened, we completely forgot to call you ... No, we’ve just got back from the hospital ... Yes, the hospital ... I’m afraid Sam was attacked last night. He was badly injured, and there’s some damage to his throat. He won’t be able to come into work ... Of course, he’ll let you know as soon as he can ... Thank you, Mr. Milton. I will. Goodbye.’

Tabby hung up the phone and turned to face him. ‘He says to take as much time as you need and keep him updated.’ Sam nodded and sat back down heavily.

His wife walked over to him and pulled his head to her stomach, where she

hugged him tenderly. 'It's all going to be okay, Love. How about a cup of tea?' Sam nodded. Tabby went over to the kettle and filled it with water.

As she set about the process of making the drinks, Sam wandered over to the kitchen window and looked out over his street. It was a long road, full of semi-detached houses. Large gardens fronted each property, and hedges wound up the road in both directions. Leafless trees grew out of the pavement every thirty feet or so, and in the winter sunshine, the bricks of the houses glowed ruddy red. Cars and vans were parked along each side.

The house he lived in had been redeveloped and segregated into three large apartments. He and Tabby had two bedrooms, a large living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom, all on the same floor. It was cosy, but then it was all the two of them needed.

They had spoken about children, and Sam had been excited about the idea; he could think of nothing more wonderful than starting a family with Tabby. It would have to wait, now. His mood darkened as he thought about the drugs he was now on, and the threat they represented. He would not be able to have unprotected sex with his wife until he got the all-clear. That was six months away. Assuming he actually got the all-clear. Rage burned through him, and he slammed his fist down on the windowsill.

A shout from further down the road caught his attention. He looked towards the noise and would have groaned if he could have. A large group of youths, maybe fifteen of them, boys and girls, were making their indolent way up the street. They were about sixteen, and for some reason they had chosen Sam's street to hang around on. It seemed as if they were there most nights. They were loud; their swearing echoed around the otherwise quiet residential area. They threw litter all over the place, rode bikes, and kicked footballs that scratched cars and damaged flowers. They brought beer and spirits with them and got drunk, throwing themselves through the hedges, squealing with laughter. Often, they fought with each other like dogs.

Old Mrs. Nicholas from across the street had remonstrated with them when a tennis ball had slammed into her window a few months ago. Since then they had made a point of throwing stuff at her house and shouting abuse at her. The poor

old lady, a widow in her early seventies, was terrified of them. He saw her curtains draw shut as the crowd closed on her house. Sam had called the police on more than one occasion; a community support officer would turn up an hour or so later, take names, and move the crowd on. It was useless. They came back the next day or the day after, drunker and angrier, and the residents inevitably found damage to their cars or property.

Better to just ignore them and hope they went away. Sam stepped away from the window and sat back down at the table. 'Oh, those thugs are back, are they,' Tabby said. 'I hope they leave before we go to bed; I think both of us could do with a decent night's sleep.'

Tabby placed a steaming cup in front of him. Sam stared down into the murky brown depths with loathing. He hated tea. He always had. He only drank it for Tabby's sake.

Life was too short to be drinking tea, he decided. He opened his mouth to tell his wife how much he disliked the stuff ... but nothing came out. Nothing would ever come out again.

'What is it, Love?' Tabby asked anxiously. Sam just shook his head helplessly.

There was a shout from the youths outside. An obscenity. Sam picked up his tea and took a sip. It burned his lips. Sam sighed glumly.

SARAH

THE RAPE WAS QUICK AND IMPERSONAL.

After her kidnap, Sarah had been dragged down deep into the abandoned train station. She struggled, tried to fight, but her captor was too strong. In the inky blackness, she could not see where she was going.

Blind and terrified, she was subdued and pinned down. A strange noise had come from behind her, a whisper like ripping fabric. When it stopped, she was

dragged to her feet. Something cold and wet touched the back of her neck, like a dog, slobbering on her. The fluid was thick and viscous and burned slightly.

Two tiny prongs touched either side of her neck, like twin needles, and then they were driven into her flesh. Coldness washed down her spine from the puncture wounds and settled at the tips of her fingers. Slowly, that coldness began to make its way up her limbs. Sarah tried to fight it, but it was futile; the awful paralysis crept insidiously through her twitching body. She collapsed back to the floor and tried to scream, but nothing came from her constricting throat.

Lying in the darkness, Sarah blinked. Her eyelids seemed to be the only muscles in her entire body that were working. As the darkness collapsed on top of her, and claustrophobia threatened to tear her sanity away, she heard the slow thudding of her heart, and felt a moment of insane thanks that it had not been frozen too.

Then, powerful fingers grasped her by the hair and dragged her mercilessly down hard stairs and along slick, stinking floors. Sarah tried to put her feet down, to prevent any further scrapes and bruises to her already abused legs and back. It was no good; the paralysis from the wound in the back of her neck held her, and her captor seemed to take a perverse pleasure in tugging her along the floor.

Eventually, he gripped her by the scruff of her neck and yanked her to her feet. She sensed open space all around, and she could feel an empty chasm in front of her. For a few seconds, she dangled precariously over that hidden void and then a firm hand had shoved her in the small of the back, and she fell forwards.

Falling in darkness had been the worst part of her ordeal up to that point. She could still feel the air hissing past her face. Without sight, she had no idea how deep the drop was, and her stomach leapt up inside her, cramming itself up beneath her breastbone. The feeling of weightlessness made her gasp in fear. That awful blind fall was etched indelibly into her mind.

It ended with an abrupt impact that jarred through her body, rattling her bones and causing her to bite her tongue painfully. She lay in a small pool of water at the bottom of the hole, needing to wail and sob her pent-up terror into

the darkness.

Slowly, the paralysis that gripped her slipped away. She wasn't sure how long it took; in the darkness, time ran differently. Maybe a couple of hours, she thought.

When she could move again, she touched her ankle and grunted in pain. She must have twisted it when she fell. It wasn't broken, but she wouldn't be walking on it for a while.

Crying, Sarah had crawled until she reached a slick, stone wall. Using the wall as support, she pulled herself upright and balanced on her uninjured foot. She hobbled slowly along the wall until she worked out that she was in a small circular pit. She held her hands up as far as they would go, but she could not reach the top.

Falling back to the damp floor, she had hugged her knees and wept. That was when she knew she was going to die – what else could she possibly have been taken for? She sat in the darkness and started to conjure up in her mind all the terrible ways they might kill her. Guns and knives, needles and saws, teeth and cigarettes ... all these things featured somewhere in the awful visions that she spun for herself in the darkness. A horrible idea sprung from nowhere: maybe they intended to bury her here alive.

When she heard the scrape of a foot somewhere above her, she almost cried with relief. 'Please,' she begged, over and over again. 'Please don't hurt me.' Whoever was standing at the lip of her pit stood in silence for so long, she thought that maybe she had imagined the sound. Then there was a sense of movement above her, and a second later, the sound of naked feet splashing in the muck at the bottom of her hole.

Somebody had jumped down into the pit with her. Sarah pushed herself back against the wall and covered her crying eyes with her forearms. A strong hand grabbed her hair and wrenched her to her feet. She wailed as she was forced upright and then pinned, face first, against the slick stone. Her ankle throbbed in an unremitting agony. She was forced to stand there, tasting the mouldy water that clung in a fine dew to the sides of the pit.

Long fingers reached from behind, squirming their way between her legs.

They grabbed at her knickers, pulling them roughly down to her knees. Then she felt a swollen phallus press up at her.

It had been painful, and her flesh had torn at the few short, brutal thrusts it had taken for her attacker to ejaculate. His breathing was calm and measured, as if he took no pleasure from what he was doing. His breath had been hot and rotten on the side of her face, his skin warm to the touch. Then he was finished, and she slumped back to the damp floor with blood and semen running down her thighs. Her attacker was gone, though she didn't know how he had climbed out.

Sarah sat in the pit and cried again. She was not dead yet, she told herself, trying desperately to find courage in the words. It would not be long though, a sad part of her whispered. There was a sound. Sobbing. Sarah sat upright. It got louder and louder, and she could tell that it was a female voice.

There was no light, but Sarah didn't need it to picture the scene above. Another poor girl was being dragged down here. Sarah heard an awful wail as the girl was pushed into a nearby pit. She thought about shouting out, to let the girl know that she was not alone and that it would be all right. She didn't. In her personal agony, Sarah couldn't find it within her to give the poor unfortunate girl hope – she was too close to the end now, with too many sins to her name, without adding further lies to the list.

MARK

THE DISCORDANT WHINE OF THE GATE BUZZER SHATTERED THE QUIET OF THE office. Mark looked up from his computer and glanced at a bank of monitors that covered one wall of his study. The room was a combination of Victorian aesthetic and harsh modern practicality. The walls were dark lustrous oak, the floor was covered in a thick burgundy shag, and one wall was dominated by a huge window, which overlooked the grounds at the rear of the house.

The room was sparsely furnished. Facing the door from behind a large

wooden desk, was a deep leather chair, which Mark sat in. The window was behind him. On the desk were three massive flat screen monitors and a wireless keyboard and mouse. A neat pile of files lay in a tray to Mark's left. To his right, another tray held a sheaf of papers, each with Mark's signature scrawled at the bottom. Beyond that, there were another two trays, both containing more files.

The wall to Mark's right supported another big flat screen television, currently showing BBC News 24 with the sound off. To his left, the entire wall was dominated by the bank of monitors he had glanced up at. There were twelve of them, four across and three deep. Their thirty-two-inch screens could display everything from stock markets and important documents, to memos and security cameras. Mark was interested in one of the security cameras.

Grabbing the wand – a motion-sensitive remote control – he pointed it at the screen currently showing the front gate of his mansion,. He dragged the image on to the middle monitor in front of him. Immediately the images swapped. He dragged another image to the right-hand monitor and the view from the intercom camera of a car at the gate sprang to life. A virtual button sat unobtrusively in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen.

Jason's round face stared back absently. Mark sighed. 'Intercom,' he said. There was a crackle, and then the speakers growled to life. The noise of the car's idling engine filled the room. 'Jason, you're ten minutes early.'

'I'm sorry, Mr. Jones; the traffic was lighter than I expected.'

Mark tapped the virtual button. The touchscreen monitor issued an artificial click. He heard the gate grinding open through the intercom speaker. 'Come up to the house,' Mark said. 'I'll meet you in the Solar. Intercom; off.'

Mark made his way through the labyrinthine corridors of his home, walking up two flights of stairs and heading to a room towards the centre of the building. Jason knew his own way there, having been the senior security consultant on the electronic features that had turned the massive structure into an automated fortress.

Reaching a door, which was no different from the three other doors on the third-floor corridor, Mark pressed the wall to its right. A hidden panel swung back, revealing a fingerprint scanner. Mark placed his right index finger on it

and waited while the scanner read the whorls and ridges. A red light flickered to green and the door clicked. Mark pushed it open and made his way into the room beyond.

The room was a twenty-by-twenty-foot steel box. An oval table was placed in the middle, with eight leather chairs arranged around it. Set into the table, before the chair facing the door, was a small panel with three switches. Mark went to that chair and sat down. A couple of minutes later, the door clicked open again and Jason walked in.

He was a big man. Easily six feet tall and carrying the ungainly bulk of someone who ate too well and too often, his round face was red and flustered. A film of sweat covered his brow, and his usually neat brown hair was lank and damp. Jason wore an expensive suit and carried a black suitcase, which he put on the table as the door closed behind him. He pulled a handkerchief from an inside pocket and wiped his forehead.

‘I still think you should get a lift installed in this bloody place,’ Jason grumbled.

Mark ignored him. Wordlessly, he flicked the three switches in front of him and felt a dull hum as the anti-surveillance measures formed an electromagnetic shell around the room. ‘You have the transcripts?’ he asked when he was satisfied nobody could hear their conversation.

Jason opened the suitcase and passed him a bundle of neatly typed A4 paper. ‘This is what we’ve got, so far. It’s in the fairy tongue. It’s running through the translation programme at the moment, but it’s going to take about thirty-six hours.’ He shrugged.

Mark spent a few seconds futilely browsing through the alien language on the documents in front of him. It was a constant irritation to Mark that despite years of study, he still could not understand the enemy’s language; it was completely alien and took a military specification, code-cracking super-computer to decipher it. While Mark glared at the papers, Jason took the opportunity to collapse into one of the chairs. It groaned alarmingly under his weight.

‘You have the original tapes?’ Mark demanded.

‘Copies with me. The originals are at my office.’

‘Bring them here – I’ll put them into the vault.’

Jason shrugged. ‘No problem.’

‘I want the translation as soon as it’s done. All the copies.’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Good. What have they been doing?’

‘Target One went out shoplifting for his buddy this morning. Clothes and meat. I don’t understand why he doesn’t just go and rob a bank or something.’

‘Too high-profile,’ Mark answered, still gazing at the puzzling phonetics in front of him. ‘Clothes and meat are constantly going missing. They’ll just put the missing stock down to any one of hundreds of thieves. If it stole jewellery or other high-value items, people would get curious. Target One is a wretch, but it is not stupid.’

‘Oh, right. Anyway, he stole a load of stuff and went home to pick up Target Two. Then they went to the pub. That’s where that conversation took place. They’re still there. My man’s sticking with them and streaming everything he records live to the server.’

‘Good. Keep following them. Keep recording and run it all through the computer. Let me know when you’ve got something.’

Reading the dismissal in the words, Jason stood up. As he closed his briefcase, he looked around the windowless, stainless-steel room. ‘I wonder why it’s called a Solar,’ he pondered absently as the catches clipped shut. ‘I mean, there isn’t a lot of sunlight, is there?’

Mark looked up at him with a cold expression. ‘A Solar was a room used during the medieval period as a place for people to get a little solitude. It has nothing to do with the sun. I first came across the concept in France in the thirteenth century. I have always liked the idea of having somewhere to be alone,’ Mark added pointedly.

‘Oh. Well, I’ll, er ... I’ll let you know as soon as anything changes.’ Jason turned and hurried from the room. After he had gone, Mark stood up and wandered back to his study with the documents in his hand.

Walking over to the desk, he picked up the wand and pressed a button on it. A panel under the flat screen television slid back, and three shelves rolled

smoothly out. On them was a collection of electronic equipment. Mark painstakingly scanned the documents that Jason had given him and brought them up on the middle monitor. Then he sat down and stared at them, deep in thought.

Camhlaidh

‘SO, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?’ CAM ASKED AS HE SAT DOWN WITH FRESH drinks. They had finished eating, and their plates had been cleared away.

Grímnir reached out, picked up his glass, and settled it in front of him without drinking. He looked at Cam. ‘I do not know. I do not recognise this world. Outside of The Tower, I have never seen such great buildings as those around me, nor could I have ever imagined the magic box in your dwelling, or these strange moving huts that run along the ground like monstrous beetles. I have never seen so much stone, smothering the Mother Earth, nor smelled such foulness as the stench that clings to everything here. Where I come from, all the world is streams, and meadows, and forests. Humanity is there, of course, but they are few. They live in hovels and fight amongst themselves. They are an amusement for the Courts, nothing more.

‘Today, I have seen more humans than I ever saw in my life before I came here. It is as if the world has gone mad. What is worse, I cannot feel the magic. It has gone from the land. Where before it infused everything, now it has vanished. Yet it must still be here, for all I see around me are wonders that can only have been created by magic.

‘I have seen silver wyverns in the sky, and yet they do not fall to rend and tear at these great villages and their people. How do you tame a wyvern? These great edifices of stone are surely impossible, for who could build them without magic? What are these clothes that I wear, or this transparent flagon that holds my beer? Why can I see through that wall? Or is it solid air?’ Grímnir asked,

pointing at the window. ‘If there is no magic, how can these wonders be possible? So, I wonder, has the magic abandoned me and if so, why? But you are the same. I can sense it.’

‘Yes, I am the same. The magic has not abandoned you, Grímnir; it has died.’ He paused. ‘The humans have spread like a plague and where they touch, the magic vanishes. It is their time now, not ours. I searched for the Brigantes on the internet. They were a tribe that lived around here thousands of years ago. I’ve a feeling that somehow, you’ve come through time – there was a massive surge of magic just before you came charging into my life. Maybe that’s what brought you here. If I’m right, then things have changed.’

‘How could this have happened? What of the Courts?’

‘The Courts still exist, but they are not what they once were. The Seelie Court has withdrawn from this world almost completely ... there was a tragedy ... Anyway, they await the final death in obscurity and rarely come here. The Unseelie Court are at least trying to take something back from the humans. They send their lackeys out into the world to sow chaos and death. It never works though. There aren’t enough of them. The magic is slowly dying away, no matter what anybody does. We’ll all be dead in another fifty years or so.’

They sat in glum silence for a few minutes. Eventually, Cam roused himself to the business at hand. ‘The surge of magic I was telling you about; do you know what could have caused it?’

‘No. The last thing I remember, I was facing Cú Roí in the forests of the Brigantes ...’

‘Whoa there,’ Cam interrupted. ‘Cú Roí? The bogeyman?’

‘What?’

‘Cú Roí is a myth. A monster used to frighten children. He doesn’t actually exist.’

‘He does exist. He is evil personified, cast out by the Unseelie Court, and hunted by both. He brought destruction to the world, sucking it dry of life, killing all in his way. My body was marked with these dragons to give me power over his evil, and great spells were cast into a sword. I was sent to track him and kill him. I cornered him in a clearing of fire ... there was a portal, and there were

Barghest ... I lost the sword ... the rest is a blur. I do not remember. Then I was here, and one of Cú Roí's minions attacked me ... I ran and felt your presence.' Grímnir scrubbed a hand across his eyes. 'I do not remember. I must find the Maiden of Earth and Water. She will know what to do.'

'I don't see the problem,' Cam said. 'We're all here, so this Cú Roí can't have been all that bad, can he? I mean, he didn't manage to destroy the world. Why not just enjoy yourself?'

'I cannot,' Grímnir said.

'Look, I'm trying to do you a favour – I don't know what it was like back in your day, but the Courts aren't what they once were. There was a disaster in the Dawn. A lot of people died, and there just aren't that many of us left now. The Tower is crumbling as the magic fades, and those who survive just sit there doing nothing, waiting for us all to rot away. Don't get involved with them, or you'll end up listening to them argue endlessly about what the right course of action is, without actually doing anything. They're a bunch of useless old women and they'll kill us all. I left years ago, when I realised how pathetic they are.'

'And now you live like this?'

'It's better than the alternative. At least out here I get to live for the few years left to me. In there I'd be in some hippy-dippy focus group, trying to work out how to tap into alternative, vegan energy sources or something. No, better to be out here. At least the humans know how to have a good time. That's what you should do – seems to me that you had a lucky escape.'

'Not really.'

'What do you mean?'

'The dragons on my skin give me power over Cú Roí, but the price of that power was high.'

'Go on,' Cam said with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

'My life force is tied to that of Cú Roí's. While he lives, I live; when he dies, I die.'

'I'm not sure I want to hear this.'

'For me to be sitting here means that Cú Roí must be alive somewhere in this

world.'

'I knew I didn't want to hear this. Still, there's only one of him. How dangerous can he be?'

Grímnir laughed without humour. 'He is the most dangerous of them all. He will destroy everything. Everything he touches, he corrupts. He will suck this world dry.'

'Look, he's in the same boat as the rest of us. There isn't enough magic left for him to give somebody a nasty rash. What can he do?'

'He will find a way. He is cunning and utterly merciless. He will kill everybody, unless I stop him.'

They looked at each other for several seconds, then Cam sighed and stood up. 'I'll try and organise something for tomorrow, but tonight we're going to get drunk.' Before Grímnir could answer, Cam made his way over to the pay phone and dialled a number.

It rang for a few seconds before a gruff voice answered. 'What is it?' asked the person at the other end of the line.

'Hi, Dad, you're never going to guess what happened to me last night ...' Cam began in an artificially cheerful tone.

Samuel

SAM WRITHED ON HIS SWEAT-DRENCHED SHEETS. BESIDE HIM, TABBY SHIFTED uncomfortably, and he felt her wake up.

'Honey? Are you okay?' she asked dozily.

Sam gritted his teeth. If he could have spoken, he would have told her that no, he wasn't all right, his stomach hurt. Instead, he just held her hand to his stomach and rubbed it. She got the idea.

'It's the prophylaxis,' Tabby said worriedly. 'They said there might be some

side effects ...’

If he could have spoken, he would have told her that his bowels were churning, and his head was splitting, and the world felt as if it were made of wire wool. He would have told her that his guts felt like a blender, and that if somebody was to feed him fruit, no doubt he would shit a smoothie. Instead, he curled into a foetal ball and hugged her hand to his chest desperately.

‘It’ll get better once your system gets used to it.’

Sam nodded, but in all honesty, he didn’t believe her: this was the kind of feeling that went on for eternity. They drifted into silence and Sam stared around the room. The curtains were drawn, but a crack in the centre let in a small amount of pale light from the street outside. By it, he could see the vague bulk of the wardrobes opposite him and the glint of the television screen. Otherwise, the room was a liquid sea of blackness that played tricks on the eye.

Sam stared blankly into the shadows. His intestines gurgled and cramped. He let go of Tabby and clutched both his hands to his stomach. He felt like he was going to have to go to the toilet soon, but the thought of standing up was too much for him. Instead, he just stared and waited for the night to pass. He thought about the two detectives that he had spoken to earlier in the evening ... or at least who he had written his story down for. They hadn’t seemed overly optimistic of catching his attacker, and Sam didn’t blame them; he had told them he didn’t remember anything, still concerned that people would think him mad if he told them what he had seen. Slowly, his thoughts drifted.

The darkness became fuzzy. The air in front of him seemed to take on new substance, and Sam thought he could see scraps of matter floating around in front of his eyes. The particles were somehow darker than the rest of the room, and they spun around each other as if caught in soft air currents that Sam could neither hear nor feel.

Seconds passed while he watched them and their strange display. A light burst up in the middle. It was a tiny thing; a pinpoint star in a field of flecked nothingness. The dark matter seemed to be drawn to the light, coalescing around it, until it appeared that a solid mass hung just before his nose. Sam stared at the optical illusion with interest.

Sphere and darkness cascaded inwards, and something lunged towards him. A sleek canine head with flashing yellow eyes and too many teeth surged from out of the void. Sam got a quick impression of shaggy black fur and the smell of carrion, and then he jerked upright in bed.

A dream, he told himself as his heart rate slowed to normal. He wiped his sweating brow with an equally sweaty hand and relaxed a little. It had been a dream. The noise of raucous laughter drifted to him from outside. He glanced at the digital clock beside his bed. It was three in the morning. More laughter came from outside.

Sam struggled from his bed and moved cautiously to the window. He peered through the gap. Outside, he could see a group of youths standing around the hedge that separated Mrs. Nicholas's property from the street. As he watched, a boy holding a can of lager ran up to the hedge and turning at the last minute, threw himself into the vegetation. Sam saw the plant bend backwards under the weight of the boy. Several branches snapped audibly. A bellow of laughter went up from the watching group.

Bouncing out of the hedge, the boy did a victory lap, his arms held up above his head, his hands glowing softly in the orange glare of the streetlights. He shouted something, but his voice was garbled and only a choking grunt carried to Sam.

'Hairy fucking bollocks,' shouted one of his compatriots. The group laughed like a pack of hyenas. There was something distasteful and disrespectful in the laugh that sent Sam over the edge.

Waves of fury burned through him. Sam did not know where it came from, but the pit of his stomach was afire with brutal need. It felt like life was seeping back into atrophied limbs: as if he had been sleeping, and consciousness was returning, bright and furious. Those kids had been pissing around on his street for months now, and nobody had the courage to go and tell them to fuck off. Well, Sam thought to himself as he struggled into a pair of jeans, that ended now.

Storming down the stairs, he wrenched the front door open and stalked over to where the youths stood. One of them saw him coming and shouted something. The rest turned to watch him curiously. One said something, and the rest began

to laugh.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ Sam shouted at them, the sheer fury in his voice stilling the group for a second. ‘You bunch of inbred, useless fucking louts. You lot are everything that’s wrong with society – a bunch of fucking shits. Nothing more and nothing less, just a bunch of fucking shits. You’ve got no purpose except to torment people, and it’s not right. If I had my way, I’d put every single one of you down like rabid dogs, here and now. I’d kill you. Do you understand?’ He fixed one tall boy with bad acne in a glare, and the boy had to look away. ‘You aren’t children – you’re a pack of feral savages. You’re a disgrace.’

There was a moment of silence, and then someone towards the back sniggered. ‘Fuck off, granddad,’ a girl shouted. Sam stared at them in disbelief. For a moment, he’d had them, he knew. For a moment, he had felt their shame. The group was resistant to it though, and more heckles came after the first. A can of beer landed by his feet and showered him with lager. Sam, confused, took a step back.

What the hell am I doing out here? he thought to himself. The self-righteous rage had abandoned him, and outright terror was waiting in the wings. He took another step back. Sensing his fear, the group began shouting more obscenities at him. Another can hit him on the shoulder, spinning him around. When he regained his balance, he found the tall youth standing by him. The boy grinned spitefully and shoved Sam in the chest.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ the youth kept asking, repeating the words like a mantra. Suddenly, sirens swelled in the distance and the group stopped as one and looked up. The noise got louder, obviously coming in their direction, and one by one the group began to melt away. The tall youth was the last to go. ‘You’re fucked,’ he hissed. ‘I know where you live.’ He turned and ran, leaving Sam with the threat hanging heavy in his ears.

Sam sat down in the middle of the street and tried to make sense of what had just happened. Tabby came out and tried to help him to his feet. She was speaking in the background, but her words were a buzz. ‘I thought they were going to kill you ... called the police ... what got into you ... medication ...’ The

words drifted past him as he sat and tried to work out why he had reacted like that.

It had been so stupid. He had made his home, himself and his wife a target. Tears formed at the corners of his eyes. Then he stiffened in Tabby's arms. He had shouted at the youths – he had spoken.

Camhlaidh

‘WHAT IS GOING ON?’ GRÍMNIR ASKED. THERE WAS A DEFINITE SLUR IN HIS voice. Cam thought that considering the amount of beer the big man had consumed, it was only right that his speech was a bit messed up. They sat on the sofa in Cam's front room, watching the television.

Cam took a deep breath. ‘Well,’ he began with drunken authority. ‘Those kids are on a road trip and they decided to stop at that old house ...’

‘Why?’ Grímnir asked with confusion. ‘It is all falling down.’

‘Yes, but that's not the point. It's a movie. If they hadn't stopped there, then there wouldn't be a movie, would there?’

‘What is a movie?’

‘It's what we're watching.’ Cam racked his brain for an analogy. ‘Like a story. You had stories, right?’

‘Oh, a story,’ Grímnir said. ‘Yes, we had great stories around fire pits, where each man would compete to tell the best, and the loser would have to drink a flagon of mead!’ He barked a laugh.

Cam looked sideways at the big man. ‘Nice one,’ he said. ‘Anyway, they stopped there, and in a minute ...’ As if on cue, there was a roaring noise from the television and an overweight man in dungarees and a mask of human skin drove a chainsaw into the body of one of the unfortunate teenagers. Blood went everywhere. The two sat and watched in silence for a few minutes. Cam risked a

glance at Grímnir and saw a look of open wonder on his face.

‘Good huh?’ Cam asked.

‘It is magnificent,’ Grímnir agreed.

‘There’s loads just like it. I’ve got a massive collection.’

‘Where? I need one right now.’

‘Well, we’ve still got the rest of this one to watch first,’ Cam said a little defensively.

‘What?’ Grímnir demanded.

‘The movie,’ Cam explained, as if to a dullard. ‘There’s no point watching another one yet. We’ve got to finish this one first.’

‘The ... movie ... is ridiculous. Those children are weak and foolish, and the psychotic human is fat and slow. I meant the roaring sword,’ Grímnir said. ‘I lost my sword, but that would be a worthy substitute.’

Cam took a long drink from the tequila bottle clutched in his hand. His drunken faculties tried to make sense of what his companion was talking about. ‘You mean the chainsaw? You want a chainsaw?’ Cam burst out laughing.

Grímnir stared at him until he stopped choking on the fiery alcohol, which had caught at the back of his throat. ‘Yes – I want a Chain-Sword.’

‘Right,’ Cam said, looking back at the screen as a girl was hung on a meat hook. ‘No problem. I’ll get you a hockey mask too.’

SATURDAY



Samuel

GRISLY REMAINS FOUND AT HOUSE OF PSYCHIC, went the headline. Sam read the story in the paper with morbid fascination as he ate some toast and waited for Tabby to get ready. His stomach felt better this morning, but his breakfast tasted strangely flat, like ashes.

Early this morning, a body was found in a house in the Bowdon area of Manchester. Danielle Stone, a well-known clairvoyant and psychic, was discovered by clients who were due to attend a midnight séance. As yet, the police have made no statement except to confirm that the body of Ms. Stone was discovered in the early hours, and that they are treating the death as suspicious.

‘Sam, are you ready?’

Sam looked up from a graphic description of how Ms. Stone’s body had been found with her throat torn out, drained of blood, and partially eaten. No wonder the police were treating it as ‘suspicious’. The press were already toying with the word ‘vampire’. ‘Yes,’ he said and revelled in his ability to say it.

Tabby came into the kitchen, her hair freshly dried. ‘Let’s go then – I’m sure Dr. Jackman is very busy.’

‘He’s a doctor. He’s supposed to be busy.’ Together they walked out the front door and over to the car. Sam stared at it. ‘Son of a bitch,’ he hissed, anger

threatening to overwhelm him. The passenger side of the car had been keyed. The words ‘fucking cunt’ were scraped into the paintwork in foot-high letters. ‘Son of a fucking bitch!’ Sam shouted.

‘Sam,’ Tabby chastised. ‘Stop swearing, and for God’s sake keep your voice down.’ Sam bit back an angry reply, fighting the unreasoning hatred that was welling up in him like a dark fog.

‘It was that kid; I know it was.’

‘Probably,’ Tabby said in a business-like tone that made Sam want to yell at her. ‘There’s nothing to do about it now.’

‘I could rip his spotty little head off and ram the car down his fucking throat,’ Sam said with feeling.

‘Sam, what’s the matter with you? Kids act up. It’s not pleasant, and we’ll report it to the police, but there’s no need to get so angry. It’s not like you.’

She was right. It wasn’t like him. He took a few calming breaths, and the rage retreated into his gut. It was still there though, roiling around like a sack full of angry venomous snakes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’ve not been feeling myself recently.’

Tabby smiled at him, and it was like the sun coming out after a storm. The anger faded away.

‘I know, Love,’ she said. ‘You’ve been through a lot; you’re bound to act a bit differently for a while. Now, we can’t drive it like that, so go and get some parcel tape and cover it up.’

Dutifully, Sam went back into the house and got a roll of tape. Between them, they covered the foul words. Then they drove to the hospital.

Sam brooded about the damage done to his car while Tabby chatted about how surprised Dr. Jackman was going to be when Sam spoke to him. Sam just grunted occasionally in agreement.

They waited fifteen minutes for Dr. Jackman whose clinic was, apparently, already running late. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Autumn,’ he greeted them when they were finally sat in his office, his perpetually tired smile not reflected in his eyes. ‘How are you both this morning?’

‘We’re fine,’ Sam replied grumpily. ‘Now tell me what’s going on.’

Dr. Jackman stared at him with a blank expression. Then, slowly, the light dawned behind his eyes. ‘Bloody hell,’ he said with genuine surprise. ‘You spoke.’

‘Yes, it was quite a shock to us as well, Doctor,’ Tabby said.

‘Right, well, I suppose it would have been. A pleasant one though.’ Dr. Jackman quickly unravelled Sam’s bandages. He seemed taken aback, and even Tabby blanched slightly at what was underneath.

‘What?’ Sam demanded worriedly.

‘There’s nothing,’ Dr. Jackman said weakly.

‘What do you mean?’ Sam asked with a hard edge to his words.

‘There’s nothing. There’s no wound, no scar ... nothing.’ He picked some thread out of the bandages. He held them up, so Sam could see them. ‘The stitches. They’ve come out by themselves. You’re completely healed. It’s impossible.’

‘It’s a miracle,’ Tabby said.

‘No ... there must be a rational explanation. Your husband must have some freakish regenerative ability. Maybe a hugely increased metabolism or something ...’

‘Freakish?’ Sam asked dangerously. He had stomached enough of this man who one minute insisted he would not speak for the rest of his life, and now, shown to be incompetent, was trying to blame his failure on him. ‘I’ll tell you what I think, Doctor.’ He twisted the last word sarcastically.

‘Sam ...’ Tabby began.

‘No,’ Sam interrupted. ‘He told me I wasn’t going to speak again. Do you know how terrifying that was for somebody who’s trained as a solicitor, who wants to be barrister? To be told that I wouldn’t be able to support my family or do my job? He was wrong. And now he’s calling me a fucking freak?’

A snarl rumbled somewhere deep in Sam’s throat. ‘Now wait a minute,’ Dr. Jackman said. ‘Your wounds have been well documented. I consulted with a number of colleagues. There was no way you should have been able to speak ever again. Even if I made a mistake about that, there was no mistake about the damage to the tissue of your throat. It was practically torn out. Your body has

healed an injury that should have required months – possibly years – of rest and treatment, in one day. If we're being frank, it should have killed you. The medical applications of your ... ability ... could be vast.'

'So, what are you saying then? That I'm some sort of mutant? An oddity? Some bizarre monster to be poked and prodded and tested?' The rage was back, swelling in him, ugly and out of control.

'No, not at all. This is amazing, Mr. Autumn. Your healing rate is amazing. You are amazing.'

'Listen to the doctor, Sam, this is good news. He's only trying to help.'

'Of course he is,' Sam sneered. 'That's all you ever talk about. Dr. Jackman this, Dr. Jackman that.' As he said it, Sam realised that it was true. Ever since yesterday, all Tabby had talked about was Dr. Jackman. His opinion, his diagnosis, how clever he was. Anger spilled into his tone. 'You fucking slag, why don't you just fuck him here and be done with it? Then they can take me away and strap me down in some lab, and you and Doctor-shithead-Jackman can live happily ever after.'

'Sam,' Tabby said, her voice quiet, full of hurt, pathetic.

It was too late. All the vitriol and anger that had been building in Sam since he had been bitten finally exploded. 'And then you can go and suck off the little prick that fucked up my car, since you don't think it's anything to get upset about. Fuck you, Tabby. Fuck you all.' He turned and stormed out of the room.

Part of him was incredulous about what he was doing. The things he had just said to the woman he loved were unforgivable. Sam couldn't understand what possessed him. There was something in him, something that wanted to cause pain, to say the worst things it could, to sow destruction and chaos. He stalked through the hospital. His face was a mask of such sheer aggression that people pushed themselves up against the walls to let him pass. Sam barely noticed.

Reaching the entrance, he stepped out into the bright morning air. In the winter chill, beneath the weak sunlight, he turned his face up to the heavens. He felt more alive than he ever had. The dark thing delighted in the words he had said, the truths he had spoken. Why had he never seen it before? Tabby was always flirting with people, telling him to grow up while she whored herself all

over the place. He couldn't think of any specific examples, but that wasn't the point.

Hot rage coalesced into something cold and bitter, and a vast calm settled over him. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned. Tabby stood there, her eyes wide and full of tears. Her face was crumpled in hurt and heartache. Sam despised her then.

'Sam, what's going on? I know you're upset, but that was an awful thing to say. I love you, Sam. Just come home and we'll sort everything out.'

For a moment, Sam's world seemed to balance on a knife-edge. Then slowly, ponderously, inevitably, it tipped towards the darkness. 'Fuck off, Tabby. I never want to see your fat, ugly face ever again.' He turned and began to walk away. He heard her begin to cry but ignored it. He felt an enormous sense of liberation and he smiled.

She chased him and grabbed his shoulder again. Sam turned and slammed his clenched fist into her face, driving her to the ground. She stared up at him, her crying stopped, as she clutched a split lip.

Their eyes met, and Sam felt panic and hurt and loss fighting to be heard, but they were small voices, overwhelmed by the greater call: the vicious exhilaration of violence. He spat at her contemptuously, then turned and walked away. This time she did not chase him.

MARK

FOR ONCE, SLEEP BROUGHT MARK DREAMS. HE WOKE AMIDST BUNCHED-UP sheets and sweat-drenched pillows, and there were tears on his face. He sat at the edge of the bed and scrubbed them away angrily. Then he held his head in his hands. The phone rang again – the noise had woken him – and he ignored it. Eventually it stopped.

'Time,' he said with a cracked voice.

‘The time is ten-thirty-two and forty-seven seconds in the AM,’ a pleasant female voice intoned. Mark lay back on the bed. He had overslept. He tried to remember what the dreams had been about, and they came tumbling back.

Groaning, he got up and walked into the *en-suite* bathroom. The shower was hot and relaxing. Mark tried to forget the night’s memories, but they would not go away. Eventually he was forced to face his past.

Nearly two thousand years ago, he was called Marcus; an ignorant boy who had learned that the world held more secrets and mysteries than he could ever possibly comprehend. Even now, millennia later, he still did not understand everything that happened in that circle of standing stones, the day before he was due to marry Annaea. He sighed. He had wandered the world for an age, seeing unbelievable sights and accruing vast knowledge, possibly even wisdom, yet this torment persisted.

He remembered his words even now, and his crass and haughty arrogance still caused him shame.

I know enough. I know that Rome is the centre of the world, and eventually all people will bow to its greatness. Rome will last forever, and I am Roman. He had said them with such conviction. The words haunted him now.

The curse brought on him had caused him nothing but misery. He had challenged the girl, demanding she prove who she was, and the proof she showed him was complete.

Mark was immortal, unkillable. It was the secret dream of his entire species – to live forever and see the mysteries of time unravelled. It should have been a blessing, but the girl had told him there would be a price, and the price was so high it had leeches all the joy from him.

One thing he realised was that even though his body had lived for a vast amount of time, his heart and soul had died four months after the events in the stone circle. Mark felt dead: a zombie. He only had one purpose, and yet for all his resources, he was unable to fulfil it, no matter how many times he tried.

Mark spent a couple of months trying to kill himself back around the fall of the Roman Empire, when he realised it had all been for nothing – until then, he had clung to the insane belief that the price was worth paying if his civilisation

survived. When the Germanic mercenary, Odoacer, captured Ravenna in 476 and deposed Romulus Augustus, Mark came to the conclusion that his life was futile. Out of time, out of hope, in a world he did not recognise, he degenerated into madness.

In the months after the Empire collapsed, he truly began to understand the meaning of immortality. It was helplessness, and loneliness, and a resistance to fire and water, blades and clubs, cold and poison; no matter what he tried, he would not die. He went through agonies and by the end, he realised that he had no choice but to play the fairy woman's sick game.

Over the centuries he did play, and each time he lost. Every time he lost, a bit more of his humanity seeped away until gradually he became as he was now – emotionless and tired of everything.

Boredom was the greatest hell imaginable, and Mark had been bored for fifteen hundred years. Food no longer tasted of anything, pleasures of the flesh were just so much sweaty inconvenience, and nobody could hold a decent conversation with him because he knew so much more than anybody else. He was aloof and distant, part of the world and yet dislocated from it in a way he could never adequately describe.

His hatred for the fairy folk was the only passion he had left; for what they had done to him, he tracked them, and he killed them indiscriminately. No matter how many he wiped away, though, he would never be able to right the wrongs against him. He thought of Annaea, and tears threatened to overcome him again. That wound was still raw, and he knew that it would never heal.

Pushing it away and sealing it down deep in his gut, Mark dried himself and made his way to the gym.

©amhlaidh

CAR THEFT WAS EASY WHEN YOU WERE AN ELF.

Cam spun a net of illusion around himself and wandered up to the house. He rang the doorbell and waited. After a minute, an unshaven man in a dressing gown opened the door with a petulant expression on his face. From the bags under his bloodshot eyes, and his dried, chapped lips, the man had a worse hangover than Cam.

The householder looked around his front garden, his eyes glazing, as they passed over Cam who waited patiently in front of him. The man looked around again, his frown deepening.

‘Damn kids,’ he muttered under his breath as he turned and walked back into the house. Cam followed on his heels and sidestepped neatly into the narrow hallway as the man slammed the front door behind him. The man walked on towards the back of the house, oblivious to Cam who was looking around expectantly. He saw what he needed on a sideboard next to the stairs.

Grabbing the keys, he let himself out and walked over to a black Honda Civic that was parked on the road in front of the address. He pushed the remote button on the key and grinned as the car beeped happily, its indicators winking at Cam in welcome. Cam slid into the driver’s seat and drove off. He let the Glamour fall away, and it was like a web of light dissipating from his mind, to spill out onto the bleak winter streets beyond the windscreen.

First, he went to a hardware store and picked up something for Grímnir, and then he made his way back to the flat. He drove recklessly, weaving in and out of traffic at high speed, confident of his own reflexes. He didn’t worry about the police at all.

A speed camera flashed as he sped past it at fifty in a thirty-mile-an-hour zone. He ignored it. Usually he didn’t bother with cars – his own little world was conveniently sized and contained everything he needed within a short walk of his front door. Today, however, he needed a vehicle. The meeting with his father was arranged at a spot too far out to walk.

Engine shrieking, he skidded into his own street and tore towards his home. He slammed the brakes on, causing the back tyres to fishtail. The car shuddered to a halt and then stalled. Cam pulled the key out of the ignition and stepped

onto the pavement.

The exhilaration of the fast drive seemed to have banished his hangover. He picked up the items he had stolen and then let himself in. He whistled a little tune to himself as he closed the front door behind him.

Grímnir sat on the sofa in front of the television. Cam wondered why he bothered – the big man couldn't understand a word that was being said on the screen. Cam ambled over and peered over the top of Grímnir's shaggy head. He was watching a children's show. Demented puppets were running around, screaming at each other; Grímnir seemed enthralled. Cam shook his head and tossed the bag down onto the sofa next to his house guest.

'There you go,' he said. 'A present.'

'What are these crazed creatures?' Grímnir asked, pointing at the television. 'I have never seen their like.'

'They're puppets, you daft twat,' Cam said conversationally in English.

'Speak the True Tongue,' Grímnir snapped.

'They're toys.'

'Ah, that makes sense. I thought they were blind, the way their eyes protruded so blankly.'

'Blind? Yeah, that was the obvious explanation for a furry, bright purple midget with a Mohawk. Nice one. Open the bag.'

'What is it?'

'Open it and find out,' Cam said with exasperation. Grímnir had discovered the mechanics of zips when he had first put his jeans on. His thick fingers barely fumbled at all as he opened the bag.

Inside there was something large and lethal looking. Grímnir pulled it out with a rapturous expression on his face. He hefted it in one hand and then swung it around a couple of times experimentally. He looked at Cam with a serious expression on his face. 'Thank you, my friend, it is a wondrous gift.'

Cam actually felt himself blushing. Nobody had ever thanked him for anything before, and nobody had ever called him 'friend'. 'Hey, don't worry about it. You'll probably need it.'

'Yes. How does it work?'

‘I have no idea. Let’s look at the instructions.’

The instruction manual stated that the item was a Ryobi PCN-4450 Chain Saw, with a twenty-inch blade and a 40cc two-stroke engine with zip start. ‘Whatever the hell that means,’ Cam said. ‘It’s got a fast-acting inertia chain break, an ignition module, primer bulb and choke, a silencer – which will come in handy – and a three-point anti-vibration handle.’ Cam threw the manual to one side. ‘I think you pull that thing there and it starts.’

Grímnir pulled it but nothing happened. ‘Why does it not work?’

‘I think you’ve got to put some petrol in it.’

‘What is petrol?’

‘Fire juice, my man. We’ll get some on the way to meet my dad.’

‘Where do we get it from?’

‘Don’t worry – stealing petrol’s easy when you’re an Elf.’ Cam grinned at Grímnir; a wide mischievous smile comprised of perfect white teeth.

Samuel

SAM FELT RELAXED AS HE WAITED IN THE COFFEE SHOP. SHE WOULDN’T BE LONG: he could feel it. He had sent her a text message shortly after his liberating exchange with Tabby, and he knew she wouldn’t be able to resist. Ridiculous concepts of honour and faith had chained him to one woman ... he shook his head in disbelief as he sipped his coffee.

Why had he never seen it before – the sly glances, the innuendo, the teasing? It had been a flirtation, a seduction, and he had been too soft to recognise it. Well, he thought to himself with rising anticipation, the rules that had bound him had faded away, and the now incomprehensible veil of love had been lifted. Now he was going to have some fun.

The jangling of the bell above the door made him look up. Annalise walked

in, looking as sumptuous as ever. Sam's heartbeat began to thunder with barely contained anticipation. Her golden hair shimmered in the weak sunlight that slid through the blinds. She wore a pair of tight jeans and a thick winter coat, open at the front to reveal a deep cleavage. Wide green eyes dominated a face whose perfection was etched from high cheekbones, a tapered chin, and rich, heart-shaped lips. Sam's mouth went dry even as his teeth clenched hungrily.

She spotted him, and her lips tightened as if she were angry. Sam's smile grew wider at the look – he knew it was an act. Annalise walked over and sat down opposite him. Slipping a large shoulder bag from her arm, she put it on the table between them like a barrier. 'What do you want, Sam?'

'Why so hostile?' he asked.

'Your text said you needed to see me as a matter of urgency. I was in the middle of something.'

'What were you in the middle of? Afternoon tea? You don't strike me as the type.'

'You don't know anything about me.'

'You're still upset because I wouldn't go home with you on Thursday, aren't you?' He reached over her bag and patted her hand. 'Don't worry, I'm going to give you a second chance.'

Outrage and disbelief warred across her face. 'Go home with me? Don't flatter yourself. I offered to share a taxi because we were going in generally the same direction and you were drunk. It wasn't an offer of anything else.'

'Fine,' Sam said airily. 'I apologise. Obviously, I misread the situation.' His sly smile made it clear that he didn't think anything of the sort.

'Look, what do you want?' Annalise said impatiently.

'Why are you so eager to get out of here, Annalise? What have you got to go home to?'

'Something much better than you.'

'Then why did you come?'

'Because I always thought you were a sweet man – harmless – and I heard about you getting attacked. I thought maybe you needed a shoulder to cry on.'

Sam laughed with genuine humour, the sound cutting through the low buzz

of conversation at the other tables. 'Harmless? Maybe I was, maybe I was ... but not anymore. What have you got to go home to, Annalise?'

'What's wrong with you, Sam? You're ... different.'

'I've seen the light. Life's too short, and you're too beautiful. I had to see you, had to talk to you ... it was inevitable.' He smiled at her again and saw her eyes narrow slightly, as if she were working something out. 'You know how the company works, Annalise. You know how much Mr. Milton respects me. I am the star that I think you know you should hitch your wagon to. I've seen how you look at me.' He shrugged and sipped at his coffee again.

'This is outrageous,' she stormed, brushing her hair back angrily as she pushed her face aggressively towards him. 'I don't know what you're suggesting ...'

'Of course you do,' Sam said blandly.

'... but I'm not that kind of woman ...'

'Yes, you are.'

'... and I'm certainly not the kind of woman who would ever think about hitching any part of my wagon to you!' she spat.

'You tried Milton, didn't you? But he's old and married and not interested. I bet he told you that you reminded him of his daughter. Or was it his granddaughter?' Sam leant forwards until his face was only inches from hers. 'I, on the other hand, am young and virile and very interested,' he whispered.

Annalise jerked her head backwards, the corners of her mouth turning down in disgust. 'You're delusional.'

Sam leant back with one arm draped over the back of the chair next to him. He beamed at her. 'Come off it, Annalise. You're only angry because I've taken the power away from you. Don't worry, you'll have plenty to play with soon enough.'

'Fuck you, Sam,' she said as she stood to leave.

'That's the general idea.'

She picked up her bag.

'If you go,' he said quietly, 'that is the end of it.'

She paused.

‘Tell me, Annalise, and tell me honestly; what have you got to go home to? A cat? Some goldfish? A novel? You can go back to your lonely apartment, or you can come with me and I can make your dreams come true.’

‘What happened to you?’

‘I had my throat torn out. That sort of a thing changes a man.’ It was true. Sam had never felt so alive. His veins hummed with energy, his senses were alive to the smells of coffee and perspiration in the small shop. He could hear everything, feel the air on his skin, and he could taste the heat coming off the woman in front of him. She was attracted to power, and she could sense it in him.

‘I want you, Annalise. I don’t want your love or your respect, I just want you. To taste you, to lie with you, to fuck you. Is that so bad? And in return, I can give you everything you ever wanted.’

‘Where?’

‘How about the Hilton? Our first liaison should be done in style, don’t you think?’

She stared at him for a moment with frank appraisal. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘But if you’re bullshitting me – if you’re just high or something – I’ll rip your balls off.’

‘Your hands aren’t big enough, sweetheart,’ Sam said with a wink.

@amhlaidh

PARKING THE STOLEN CAR SOME INTERMINABLE DISTANCE BEHIND THEM, CAM and Grímnir had walked through damp forest, across a muddy deer enclosure, and then out onto a small but steep hill with a clearing at the top. Grímnir carried his bag with the chainsaw in it.

Too much light and vegetation always made Cam feel uncomfortable. He didn’t know why – the Great Outdoors was his heritage, after all.

Maybe that had something to do with it, he thought glumly as he wriggled his toes in his damp socks; he had never felt particularly in touch with the tree-hugging side of his nature. It was probably because he was only born thirty years ago, and all he remembered was cities.

As much as he hated the urban sprawl for sucking the life from the planet, he felt comfortable amongst the steel, glass, and concrete. Large cities were killing him as much as they were killing the planet, but it was an honest thing; neither the cities nor the humans made any apologies for the death of the land. They had a new order of science and laws, and no doubt they would go on and on until they wiped themselves out in some awful nuclear apocalypse. He couldn't blame them for that. It was their nature.

No, the humans – deluded, psychotic animals that they were – could not be held to account. His own people, on the other hand, had given up with nothing more than a whimper; he could not forgive them for that. He felt betrayed by their apparent apathy. He felt let down by the magic, too. He was going to die, and he did not like it.

Glancing over at Grímnir, he wondered if the big man had really taken in the fact that the time of the fairies was almost up. The tattooed man was obsessed with tracking down Cú Roí, which probably said a lot for his mental state. Even if the bogeyman was stalking the streets of Manchester, it didn't matter. Cú Roí was just like the rest of them: doomed. In fifty years, he would just drop dead, and that would be the end of the matter.

Sighing, Cam looked down at his feet. The water in the damp grass had soaked through his trainers with laughable ease, and his feet were going numb. He hugged his coat tighter around him, wishing that the bright sun held even the smallest modicum of warmth. He wondered where his father was. They had been here for an hour at least, and Cam was cold and miserable.

The journey from the car had been unpleasant as well. Cam hated walking in the countryside, and the bloody deer had insisted on coming over to nuzzle at him. Wild animals liked Elves. Cam didn't like wild animals. They stank of mud and shit, and most of them had fleas. Grímnir greeted the fauna like long lost brothers, speaking to them gently in the True Tongue, until they had a merry

procession of deer, squirrels, and rabbits traipsing behind them.

Eventually, Cam stopped and turned around. 'Get lost!' he screamed at them. The noise broke the spell, and the animals disappeared into the undergrowth.

'Why did you do that?' Grímnir demanded.

'Because these days it looks a bit odd to be walking through a forest with the cast of *Bambi* following along behind. All we needed was Mr. Bluebird and a bloody lion, and we could have opened Disneyland Cheshire.'

'There is nobody around.'

'There's always somebody around to point out how suspicious a stolen car, two men, and a petting zoo are.'

'The car isn't here.'

'But we've got to go back to it ... Look, putting aside how odd it must look, it just isn't hygienic. The rabbits are probably riddled with myxomatosis, the squirrels are likely infested with lice, and one of those deer looked decidedly rabid.'

'What is ... myxomatosis?'

'It's a disease that kills rabbits. They get cancer, go blind, and then die.'

Grímnir considered this silently as they walked. 'Where did it come from?' he asked after a while.

'I don't know,' Cam replied absently. 'Some French guy introduced it to Europe, I think.'

'A human caused it?' Grímnir asked with a dangerous undertone.

Cam looked back at him and his anger subsided. He sometimes forgot how strange and terrible all this must be to Grímnir. 'It's a virus. Nobody caused it. This isn't your world anymore, Grímnir. I wish it was, I truly do, but it's not. It's a brutal, unforgiving place, and innocent bunnies die of horrible diseases every day. And grown men do not wander around national parks like Dr. Doolittle, unless they're prepared to answer some very complicated questions.

'We aren't the rulers anymore – the humans are. And like it or not, to survive you've got to fit in.'

'The world has lost its way,' Grímnir said stonily.

'Amen to that, brother,' Cam had said. 'Come on.'

The clearing they now waited in was familiar. Cam's father also chose to live outside The Tower. Why it was acceptable for him to do so, while for Cam it was frowned upon, was just another example of the unexplained hypocrisy that seemed to drive his people.

What Cam did know was that his father had lived in the Manchester area for the last three hundred years. He never left Miðgarðr, except for a week every year to visit The Tower. Cam had gone with him on those trips when he was a child. Now, as far as Cam knew, he and his father were the only members of the Seelie Court that lived outside The Tower.

There were still creatures from the Unseelie Court knocking about in the world, causing mischief or just eating people. Cam stayed out of their way.

The hill they stood on was covered in wet grass. Around the crown of the hill grew a ring of fat, white mushrooms. The stones that had stood here were long gone; no doubt taken to help build the Tudor mansion back in the grounds of nearby Lyme Park. The only trees growing were at the base of the hill. Their branches, made skeletal by the touch of winter, seemed to be reaching up towards Cam, and he had an uneasy vision of the twigs grasping at him to pull him down into the dirt at their roots. Shuddering slightly, Cam decided he really didn't like it out here.

The sky above was clear and blue, which was a blessing – if it had been raining, he would certainly have had a nervous breakdown. The sun was at its zenith, but the noon light was cold. Cam reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a flask. Taking the cap off, he offered it to Grímnir. 'Want some?'

Wordlessly, Grímnir took the flask from Cam and poured a thin stream to the ground. The liquid was clear and pure and sparkled in the sunlight. Nodding approvingly, Grímnir took a swig. He began choking, and Cam couldn't help laughing as he took the flask back and took a long pull.

When he finally regained his breath, Grímnir looked at Cam accusingly. 'That is not water, and from the colour, it is not sour mead.'

'It's vodka.' He took another pull. 'It'll keep you warm.' He handed the flask back to Grímnir who took a second swig. This time he managed to keep it down.

'Still drinking, I see,' said a stern voice from behind him. The words were

spoken in the True Tongue, and Cam tensed in uneasy anticipation. Turning, he saw two figures walking up the side of the hill towards himself and Grímnir. The newcomers were both dressed in good walking boots and waterproofs, and Cam felt a rush of envy sweep over him at their foresight.

‘Hello, Father,’ Cam said.

‘Camhlaidh,’ his father said in acknowledgement, as he joined him at the top of the hill. ‘Won’t you introduce us to your companion?’

‘Grímnir Vafthrúdnir, this is my father, Manannán Ó Gríobhtha.’ Like all Elves, Manannán was tall and handsome. He looked the same age as Cam, though he was five hundred and twenty years older than his son. He had long, black hair and chiselled features, perfect skin, and violet eyes. He was broader than Cam and maybe an inch taller, but apart from that and the difference in hair colour, they could have been twins.

‘Well met, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir,’ Manannán said formally.

‘Oh great,’ Cam said. ‘If we’re going to have to pretend we’re in *The Lord of the Rings*, I’m leaving.’ He turned and made as if to walk away.

‘Stop there, Camhlaidh,’ Manannán snapped. Cam stopped walking and hated himself for it. Manannán addressed Grímnir. ‘This is my companion, Dow Sè Mochaomhog, and you have met my son, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha,’ Manannán said. ‘I apologise that he was what you found when you awoke. I hope he has not caused you too much disappointment.’

‘I love you too, Dad,’ Cam said sulkily.

‘Cam is a credit to you, Sir,’ Grímnir said. ‘Your son clothed me and housed me. He has helped me remain safe in a world very different from the one I am used to. Without him, I fear I may have been imprisoned, or worse.’

‘Really?’ Manannán sounded doubtful. The glow of pride Cam had felt growing inside himself disappeared at the disdain in his father’s voice.

‘Right, well that’s me done then,’ Cam said.

‘Not quite.’ Cam scrutinised the speaker. His father’s companion was the same size and build as Cam, but his eyes were green, and his chin was wider. He had long, bone-white hair, which was tied back into a ponytail to reveal the pointed ears beneath – something Cam kept hidden. A facial tattoo covered the

pale skin on the left side of his face from the point of his chin to his hairline. It was a complicated interweaving climbing vine with tiny leaves and flowers scattered amongst the foliage. The ink had faded to a faint brown.

‘Dom, is it?’ Cam asked.

‘Dow,’ the Elf replied with a humourless smile.

‘Well, Dow, as my father has no doubt told you, I am a drunk and a cynic. I’ve brought Grímnir here, but he’s your problem now.’ He looked theatrically at the position of the sun in the sky. ‘The pubs will be open, and I’m going to go and destroy some brain cells.’ He turned to walk away again.

‘Wait, Camhlaidh,’ his father said quietly. It was a request, not a command, and that alone was cause enough for Cam to stop and turn back to them.

‘What?’ he asked ungraciously.

Manannán ignored the question, instead turning to Grímnir. ‘May I ask what your purpose here is, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir?’

‘I must see the Maiden of Earth and Water.’

‘Yes, but what is your purpose.’

‘I must stop the Therian, Cú Roí.’

Manannán seemed to sag. ‘It is true then,’ he whispered to himself.

‘Oh, come on, you don’t believe that nonsense as well, do you?’ Cam scoffed. ‘It’s a fairy tale!’

‘I don’t want to point out the obvious, but so are we,’ Dow interjected wryly.

‘Screw you,’ Cam said.

‘Camhlaidh!’ his father shouted. ‘I will have no more of this pettiness.’

‘Pettiness? Pettiness, is it? Then I’ll go home!’

‘No, you won’t!’

‘I can do what I like,’ Cam whined.

‘Not this time. This time you’ll do as I say. I have indulged your childish excesses for too long. It is time for you to grow up. You have a duty to your people, and your shameful behaviour over the last decade has embarrassed me and discredited you. You are not a human, and your insistence that you are is pathetic. You steal and lie and spend your life in a state of drunken incapability. No more!’

‘What else is there? I ...’

‘I have heard the arguments, Camhlaidh, and they are nonsense. You are scared to die; you have been abandoned by the land and by your people ... nonsense! You are not scared to die; you are scared to live. You could have fifty years left to you, and you plan to squander them at the bottom of a glass. You have abandoned your race, Camhlaidh. We still strive to solve this problem, but we are few and the work goes slowly. Rather than help, you allow yourself to rot away. I should have come for you long ago, but I thought you would grow out of this nihilistic rubbish on your own. I was wrong.’

‘You cannot make me come with you.’

‘Actually, we can,’ Dow said. ‘The return of Grímnir Vafthrúdnir is something we have awaited for millennia. I am afraid you know too much, Camhlaidh. Leaving you running around and most likely drunk is a risk we cannot afford to take.’

‘Oh yeah, and who am I going to tell? Tony the ageing biker? I can imagine the conversation now. “Hey Tony, you’ll never guess what – my mate Grímnir is actually an ageless fairy from a thousand years ago, who appeared out of thin air and is hunting an immortal monster that does very unpleasant things to women!” I’d be fitted up for a straitjacket before they’d even stopped laughing.’

‘The magic that bound Grímnir Vafthrúdnir to the creature, Cú Roí, transcends death and life: if one lives, then so, too, does the other,’ Manannán said with infinite patience. ‘Cú Roí knows this. Grímnir Vafthrúdnir represents Cú Roí’s only mortal threat, and he will be hunted. As will those who have spoken with him. Those who might have information. Those who know where he is. And it was two and a half thousand years ago, not a thousand. I would have expected you to have worked out that much, at least, Camhlaidh.’

‘What was I supposed to do? Cut him in half and count the rings?’

‘I doubt that Cú Roí is worried about my presence here,’ Grímnir interjected. Manannán looked at him inquisitively. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘I lost the sword.’

There was a long silence. ‘You lost it,’ Dow said flatly.

‘That is why I must find the Maiden.’

‘You lost Camulus.’

‘Yes. It is gone, I do not know where to. Without it, I cannot harm the Miracle Child.’

‘There you go then,’ Cam said. ‘No harm, no foul.’

‘You do not understand that at which you so childishly scoff!’ Dow snapped.

‘I understand that if Grímnir isn’t a threat to this Cú Roí character, then there’s no need for me to join your little role-playing society!’ Cam returned heatedly.

‘It changes nothing, Camhlaidh,’ Manannán roared into the still morning.

There was a pause as the last of the sound echoed away. ‘What if I refuse?’

‘You will be taken against your will,’ Dow said.

Cam looked at his father and Dow and saw no compromise. He thought about running but knew that he wouldn’t get very far. Not in the woods: they weren’t his natural environment. He sighed and his shoulders slumped. ‘Okay, I’ll come with you, but as soon as this is over, I’m going back to my flat.’

‘We’ll see,’ his father said in a calmer tone. ‘I must return to my post. Dow will travel with you.’ Manannán turned to his companion. ‘If I see any sign of Cú Roí, I will send word.’

They clasped each other’s forearms in the warrior fashion, and Cam rolled his eyes. Manannán turned and walked back down the hill without looking in Cam’s direction. ‘Bye, Dad,’ Cam shouted after his father sarcastically.

‘We must move quickly, now,’ Dow said, walking to the edge of the hill.

‘Where are we going?’ Grímnir asked, picking up the bag with the chainsaw in it and slinging it over one massive shoulder.

‘Where else?’ the Elf asked with a smile. ‘To The Tower at Dawn, of course.’

Samuel

‘AND WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE, SIR?’

‘Steak.’

‘How would you like it prepared, Sir?’

‘Bleeding. Just run through a warm room with it,’ Sam said without looking at the waiter. Annalise met his gaze calmly.

‘Since when do you eat rare steak?’ she asked as she lifted her wine glass and took a sip. Sam found himself enjoying the sight, imagining what he was going to do to those perfect lips. ‘At the Christmas party, you were nearly sick when someone offered you pâté.’

Sam just shrugged and changed the subject. ‘Do you like it here?’

‘Yes,’ she said. The Podium restaurant was an elegant, open-plan affair. The lunch service was quiet, and it felt like they had the entire restaurant to themselves. Candlelit white tablecloths glowed gently in the intimate setting, and Sam could see Annalise relaxing into the luxurious surroundings. It was part of the Hilton Hotel, where Sam had booked the two of them a room on the twenty-second floor. The hotel was integrated into the Beetham Tower, a building that had only been completed in April. Its modernity made it novel, and its novelty made it fashionable. ‘So, tell me what happened when you were attacked.’

‘I found a man in an alley. I tried to help him, and he slashed my throat and took my wallet for my troubles. It happens all the time.’ He shrugged again, as if the incident meant nothing. ‘I was stupid.’

‘Why, because you got attacked?’

‘No, because I tried to help. I won’t make that mistake again.’

‘That’s a bit selfish, isn’t it?’

Sam laughed gently. ‘Coming from you, that is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.’

Annalise bridled. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Don’t you understand yet, Annalise? You don’t have to hide from me. You don’t have to pretend that you care about anybody but yourself. You desire power, and I can give it to you. In turn, I want your body ... it is a business arrangement.’ Annalise looked at him with narrowed eyes and he laughed again. ‘Don’t delude yourself, sweetheart – I don’t love you. I don’t even like you that

much. I just want to fuck you.'

'You make me sound like a whore,' she said angrily.

Sam shrugged again and drank some wine. The liquid was acrid, and he screwed up his face in disgust. 'Does your wine taste sour? I think it's off.'

'No, it's fine. Don't change the subject.'

'Whore? Perhaps. But then, so what? We all prostitute ourselves in one way or another. We let people use us, and we get something in return: money, power ... it's the oldest form of symbiosis in the world. It's certainly nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, Jesus Christ, we're solicitors. The only two professions in the world that solicit are lawyers and whores. Perhaps it's just our nature.'

'I'm not a whore,' Annalise snapped.

'If it makes you feel better,' Sam said blandly. 'But if you're not, then why are you here with me? You know what this is all about.'

'I'm here with you because I'm attracted to you. I always have been.'

'I told you, there's no need to lie.'

'Fine, I'm here with you because I want to see what you're going to do.' She put her glass down and leant forwards. 'The way you're always wittering on about that insipid little wife of yours ... I don't think you'll go through with it.'

Sam's smile was winter cold. Annalise saw it, and doubt flashed across her face. 'If that were the case, then you've made an awful mistake,' Sam said. 'Fortunately, it's not – you're here because I promised to make all your dreams come true.' He took another drink and then put the glass down heavily. 'That really is very bad. Let me try yours.' He leant over and tasted Annalise's wine. It, too, tasted like vinegar, and he spluttered slightly as he replaced her glass on the table.

A wave of nausea rolled through him, and Sam raised a hand to his forehead. 'Are you okay?' Annalise asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'It's just ...' But he didn't know what it was. There was something in his head with him, pulling at his thoughts. It only lasted for a moment, but Sam felt like somebody was looking out through his eyes. Another personality that was both a distance away and yet very close. There was a connection ... and then it disappeared as quickly as it had materialised.

The restaurant swam back into focus. 'I knew it,' Annalise said, 'you're high.'

'No, it was something else. I'm okay now. Do you still want to eat?'

'What?'

'Let's go up to the room now.'

'What about the food?'

'I'll have it sent up.' Sam hailed a waiter and told him what he wanted.

'It's very irregular, Sir.'

'I am not feeling well. You can either cancel the order, or I can pay for it, and you can send it up to my room.'

'I will see to it, Sir.' Sam didn't say another word to the waiter. He stood and took Annalise by the hand, and they walked from the restaurant.

The room was superb. On the twenty-second floor and facing into the city, they could see all of Manchester laid out below them. Annalise laughed for the wonder of it. Sam put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He kissed her hungrily, and after a moment she kissed him back with just as much fervour.

Their lovemaking was wild and animalistic. Later, Sam lay on the bed with Annalise laying across him naked. 'That was ... different,' she said eventually.

Sam looked down at her and grunted.

'You bit me.'

'Did I?' he asked disinterestedly.

'Yes, at the top of my thigh.' She giggled. There was a moment of silence. 'Why isn't your neck hurt?' Annalise asked. 'I mean, from what I heard, you were badly injured.'

'You only just thought to ask?'

'When I saw you, I thought you must have been lying. I thought you'd set it all up for some sick joke. But you're so different ... now I'm not so sure.'

Sam laughed. 'I heal quickly,' he said. They lay in silence for a while longer.

'Right,' Sam said eventually. 'I wonder where that food is.' He was hungry, hungrier than he had ever felt before. The thought of his steak gave him almost as much pleasure as the thought of the woman beside him. Now he was done

with her, probably more.

Annalise sat up and stared down into her crotch. Sam's eyes were drawn to the heavy breasts and flat belly of the naked woman, and he reconsidered: no food, no matter how good, would ever give him more pleasure than Annalise. 'Look,' she said, 'you broke the skin. I'm bleeding.'

Sam looked over. 'It's only a nick. It'll stop in a few minutes.' As he lay there watching her, his desire sated for the time being, he wondered how he had got here. He dismissed the thought – it didn't matter. This was what he wanted, and what he wanted, he would take.

Tabby's face flashed in front of his eyes, and something deep inside him screamed in anguish, but it was a quiet scream from a long way away, and Sam didn't pay it much attention.

There was a knock, and Sam jumped from the bed. He looked at Annalise and grinned. 'Time to eat,' he said.

MARK

MARK WAS THINKING OF A DIFFERENT PLACE AND A DIFFERENT TIME WHEN THE phone rang, startling him. His hand jerked, and the knife he was using to cut a tomato slipped, sinking deep into the flesh of his left index finger.

Sharp pain surged up his arm. He dropped the knife with a curse and clamped the end of his finger automatically. Even as the pain started, it began to fade away. He walked to the sink with the blood-covered digit. The phone stopped ringing as Mark turned on the cold tap.

Red-stained water flowed down the plug hole. Within seconds it ran clear, and Mark examined where the wound had been. Nothing but smooth, uninterrupted skin met his gaze. Being immortal did have its plus points, on occasion.

'Last caller,' he said as he walked back over to the chopping board and his

half-made sandwich.

‘Sergei Constantine rang at one fifty-five and seven seconds in the PM,’ said the disembodied female voice of the computer.

‘Phone: Sergei,’ Mark said as he spread salad cream on a piece of wholemeal bread. The dialling tone kicked in, and then he heard the discordant beeps of the number.

Sergei picked up on the second ring. ‘Mr. Jones,’ he said, his crisp European voice thick with worry.

‘What is it Sergei?’

‘It’s the girl.’

A surge of fear caused Mark to drop his sandwich back to the counter. ‘Tell me,’ he demanded. Sergei recounted the problem, and Mark set his lips tight in anger as he listened.

‘Where’s the man ... what’s his name – Sam? Where is Sam now?’ he asked when Sergei had finished.

‘The Hilton Hotel in Manchester City Centre.’

‘Go and show him the error of his ways.’

‘Yes Sir,’ Sergei said.

‘Goodbye, Sergei,’ Mark said, and the phone went dead. Mark made his way back to the gym, his sandwich forgotten.

Rage burned in him at the most basic level of his soul. Mark stripped and took his practice sword from its red sheath. He started running through some exercises, the blade whistling about his head and shoulders in sweeping arcs that got faster and faster. His mind was elsewhere as he let his body work out the anger and frustration that filled him.

Muscle memory took over, thousands of years of practice allowing his lithe frame to move through the forms effortlessly.

In his head, he was in a different time. He first realised that he was immortal, four months after his meeting with the fairy woman.

Married to Annaea, he settled into bliss. The wedding was necessarily basic, due to the barbarous conditions of the Mamucium fort. They had a small ceremony in the meadow outside the walls, followed by a feast that lasted early

into the next morning. Marcus saw nothing of it, retiring with his new wife to their private rooms as soon as possible.

Annaea blushed with excitement and joy, her giggles joining his own laughs as they fumbled through their first coupling. Later, as they lay together, Annaea made him promise that he would never leave her. He looked into her eyes and then kissed her deeply, the gesture saying more than words ever could. She snuggled into his shoulder and slept. Marcus felt a level of contentment that evening that he would never feel again. He fell asleep inhaling the scent of the woman he loved, with a smile on his face.

Four months passed and his happiness remained. Together, he and Annaea made their plans for the long journey back to Rome. They were happy days, but Marcus would only remember snippets of them: stolen moments beneath an oak tree near the stables, a shared picnic near the river, a silly cushion fight as they packed one of the huge trunks they would carry with them. What he would remember was Annaea's beautiful face, and the smile that she held for him alone.

His curse began three days before they were due to leave for Rome. Marcus was in the kitchen, directing the packing of several barrels of salted beef for the journey. Annaea found him there; his smile of happy welcome slipped from his face at the sight of her. There was a deep bruise beneath her left eye, and the strap of her white dress had been snapped.

‘What has happened?’ he demanded. A red tide of fury rose in him.

Annaea began to cry and he enfolded her in his arms, burying her face in his shoulder and shushing her gently. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed to the stone floor. Marcus fell with her. They sat there together, Marcus cradling her racked body. The kitchen staff stood around, staring dumbly, and he screamed at them to get out. They ran, filled with fear that their young Master might lash out at them in his anger.

‘What has happened? Who did this?’ he demanded again.

Slowly, Annaea's sobs petered out. ‘Octavius,’ she whispered. ‘He came to me, demanded things of me. I ... I told him no, but he became angry. His face, Marcus, it was so full of hatred. He tried ... he tried to ...’ she began crying

again.

Marcus whispered quiet words of comfort until she was calm.

‘When I refused, he hit me. I managed to get away, and I ran straight here.’

‘He will die for this,’ Marcus said. He carried her to their bedroom. Marcus found a guard and told him to stay outside the door and let nobody pass. Then he gathered up his sword and went in search of his friend, Octavius.

IN THE GYM, MARK THREW A DIFFERENT SWORD TO THE FLOOR AND FELL TO HIS knees. The memories were too painful; he shut them away. Tears ran down his face, and he scrubbed at them angrily.

Retrieving his sword, he placed it back on the stand and moved over to the other sword. The black sword. He didn’t pick it up, he just stared at it. He knew the blade intimately. He had used it more times than he could count, could feel the weight in his hands – the balance – just by looking at it.

Closing his eyes, he could hear the sound it made as he swung it: a banshee whistle that came from a notch towards the tip of the blade, which no amount of sharpening could remove. The damage had happened on the neck guard of a Jöttnar’s armour, somewhere in Norway a long, long time ago. Mark could remember how cold it was that day. He could still smell the crisp air and feel the wooden planks of the bridge beneath his feet. The fjord had been frozen and the branches of the firs on either bank had creaked under the weight of fresh snowfall. Birdsong. There was birdsong until their blades had clashed together.

That had been a hard fight, but he had killed the Jöttnar, just as he killed everything he fought. He was an engine of death, and the sword was a part of him. He had forged it himself, crafting it from the purest metals, folding it a thousand times.

There was nothing magical about it – it was simply another tool he had created to pursue his vengeance. They died hard. He killed them with silver or fire or decapitation. Separating a head from a body was quick and reliable, and the black sword was sharp and familiar. He killed them: that was his purpose.

His eyes snapped open as he came back to the present and the business at hand.

‘Phone: Jason,’ he said.

The connection was made, and Jason picked up. ‘Mr. Jones?’ he asked in confusion. ‘I didn’t expect to hear from you today.’

‘Tell me about the targets,’ Mark said, without preamble.

‘Er, I have a man following them. Just a second ...’ The sound of a few keystrokes came through the speaker. ‘Yes, according to the GPS, they are currently in an area in Cheshire ... near to Lyme Park. Just let me check the last report.’ There were a few more clicks of a keyboard. ‘Half an hour ago, my operative followed them out to a hill near Lyme Park. Some animals followed them for a while, which he thought was odd, obviously, but he puts it down to them carrying food or some such ...’

‘What are they doing?’ Mark interrupted impatiently. He reached out and gently stroked the black sword.

‘According to the last report, they were just waiting. Would you like me to find out what their current status is, Sir?’

‘Yes. Call me back in five minutes. Goodbye, Jason.’

Mark was in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water, when the phone rang again. ‘Go on,’ he snapped when the call connected.

‘Er, you aren’t going to like this, Sir, but they’ve vanished.’

‘What do you mean, “vanished”? You mean your man lost them?’

‘No, I’ve spoken to him in quite a lot of detail about this. They met two more men, and they had a conversation. My man, Zacharias, was too far away to hear anything, but from the way Target One acted, he wasn’t happy with what was said. One of the newcomers walked away down the hill. My man stayed with Targets One and Two, as instructed. Then they walked around the hill a couple of times and just ... vanished. Right in front of his eyes. It happened seconds before I phoned him.’

‘God damn it!’ Mark snapped in a rare burst of anger. ‘What about the other one – has he found him?’

‘No. Zacharias is a skilled tracker, but whoever it was left no sign. He disappeared into the woods. I stayed on the line while Zacharias looked for him.’

‘Tell him to wait there until they return.’

‘What if they don’t come back?’

‘Then he can die there from exposure for all I care. Goodbye, Jason.’ The phone went dead. Mark threw his glass across the kitchen, and it smashed against the wall.

SARAH

DAMP AND COLD DIDN’T BOTHER HER ANYMORE. NEITHER DID THE AWFUL darkness, nor the rancid smell of mould and urine. Sarah cupped one arm under her swollen belly and smiled to herself. She was going to be a mum.

The pregnancy had been so swift that she had felt the life growing in her. It had been a wonderful feeling. She was nearing her full term now. Soon the baby would be born. She hummed a happy little lullaby under her breath.

Other sounds filled the room: sobbing and cursing, and the occasional wail. Sarah heard it all but did not let it concern her. More girls had been dragged in here and thrown into neighbouring pits. Soon they would feel the miracle inside of them, and they would be happy too.

As the pregnancy advanced, she had been forced to take off her denim skirt because it was far too tight. The swelling had also pushed her top up around her armpits, and her stomach lay exposed to the air. She couldn’t see it, but she knew it was huge now. The baby would be big.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, a part of her was wondering how it had gestated so incredibly quickly – nine months of development in a day. Or how she could possibly give birth to such a massive child. The baby inside her was so big that she was unable to move. Her gigantic belly was now so heavy, it pinned her to the floor. When she ran her hand across the tight, thin flesh, she could feel where the skin had ruptured, and pus was slopping out from the tear wounds.

It didn’t matter, though – she was going to be a mum. That was the important

thing. The baby kicked, and she felt the flesh above her bellybutton bulge outwards. The pain was awful, but she bore it with a smile. ‘You’re going to be such a big boy,’ she said quietly to her stomach as she stroked it tenderly.

One of the other girls was moaning close by. She ignored it and began to sing her lullaby again.

Camhlaidh

PASSING THROUGH A FAIRY-RING WAS A SIMPLE THING. IF YOU WANTED TO GO TO The Tower at Dusk, you went around the Ring nine times, anticlockwise. If you wanted to get to The Tower at Dawn, you went around nine times, clockwise. To get from one Tower to the other, you had to pass back through the world. The only other rule was that the traveller had to go willingly – nobody, fairy or human, could be forced to pass through a Ring. Once, passage had been as safe as taking a stroll through a park. Years before, the Courts had built illusions within the Fairy-Rings. Anybody traversing them saw only the hill, and magical boundaries kept wayfarers to the path. On the ninth circuit a marble archway would appear. Stepping through the arch deposited the traveller safely at The Tower. Now, with the magic dying and the boundaries gone, it was a much riskier affair.

‘This is really stupid,’ Cam said to Dow and Grímnir. Neither of them bothered to answer him. They kept walking. On the second turn, the sky above them was still bright and blue. By the third, it had faded into a muddy brown, and by the fifth, there was only darkness around them. The blackness of the void stretched out infinitely on all sides, as well as above and below them. The Ring was lit by a series of white lights – the mushrooms from the crown of the hill – and they followed them doggedly.

If they stepped off the path between the fifth rotation and the last, they would

be lost. It might not have been much of a problem if it weren't for the tremors. Every now and again the ground shook, and if you weren't ready, it was easy to lose your balance and fall from the narrow path.

Nobody knew what caused the tremors; the prevailing thought was that the ley-lines that bound the Fairy-Rings to The Towers were slowly being torn apart, like a frayed piece of string being pulled by some unknown force, and that one day the Rings would stop working altogether. It would have been a worrying thought, but by the time that happened, all the fairy folk would be dead anyway.

Once there had been a Ring in Manchester itself – somewhere around the Gartside Street area – but the ravages of modern man, and the necessity of building in a rapidly expanding economy, meant that it had been torn up and built over, around two hundred and fifty years ago. Cam's father had tried to protect it, apparently, but in the end, he had been unable to stop progress. It was a grim metaphor for the inevitable extinction of the fairy folk. Cam felt a familiar surge of disgust.

On the eighth circuit, Cam began to relax. Then they were through, and Cam stood in another reality.

Golden light shone all around him. The sky above was clear, and a scattering of cotton-bud clouds hung in the air; the vibrant oranges and reds of the rising sun made them glow in the burnished sky.

They were in a clearing surrounded by raw, untouched forest. Massive oaks, with great branches that swept out to brush the heavens, towered around them. Amongst the trees, all manner of bushes and flowers grew in bewildering profusion. Green leaves were everywhere, and the fresh scent of the flowers' morning perfume hung in the air to tickle at the nose.

Daffodils and bluebells, ferns and thorns, daisies and roses of all colours grew beside each other in healthy abundance. To Cam's left, a deep but narrow stream gurgled from beneath the trees and curved merrily around the clearing. Two huge white swans glided sedately along it.

The noise of the brook was lost beneath a glorious dawn chorus of birdsong that was almost deafening. Below Cam's feet, lush grass formed a springy cushion, and the warmth of the place was already sucking the cold moisture from

his socks.

A trail laid out by a boundary of pebbles led from the hill, into the forest. Hanging in the path were a hundred fireflies, not yet ready to give in to the burgeoning day. Their dance of pinpoint lights was a ballet of stars, spinning and pirouetting to the music of the songbirds. Dow began walking towards them.

Grímnir raised his face to the dawn sky and inhaled. ‘Ah, can you not feel it, my friend?’ he asked Cam.

‘Feel what?’ the Elf asked.

‘It is welcoming us home. The Tower has missed us.’

‘Is that what it is?’ Cam said dourly as he slapped away an inquisitive bee. ‘I thought I had hay fever.’ They set off after Dow, who had already disappeared into the forest.

Samuel

THEY HAD EATEN AND THEN HAD SEX FOR A SECOND TIME. SAM LAY ON THE BED watching Annalise mess with the television remote, when somebody knocked on the door again. Without much thought, he stood and went to answer it.

As soon as Sam turned the handle, the door hit him with enough force to send him sprawling onto the plush carpet. Two men surged into the room, one carrying a baseball bat, the other a machete. One of the men kicked Sam savagely in the face. Annalise screamed. Another man walked in and closed the door behind him.

The third man was tall and thin, with a beak of a nose and swarthy skin. Two dark eyes stared down at Sam as if he were an insect. Sam craned his neck and saw the man with the baseball bat – a huge, Slavic-looking thug with close-cropped hair and a blunt scarred face – reach for Annalise.

‘No,’ said the tall man in a sharp European accent. ‘She can go.’ Sam

watched as Annalise gratefully pulled her clothing to her and ran out into the corridor naked. The tall man turned his attention back to Sam. 'Get up,' he said coldly.

The man with the machete tucked the weapon disconcertingly beneath Sam's chin and hauled him to his feet by his hair. He moved behind Sam and clamped a meaty forearm around his neck. Then he moved the machete down so that it caressed Sam's naked testicles.

'Whoa there,' Sam gurgled. 'Watch the goods.' His voice was light, but anger bubbled up in him. He could smell sweat and halitosis from the man holding him. His eyes quickly scanned the room. The tall man, who wore an immaculately tailored grey business suit with a white shirt and a blood red tie, stood in front of Sam with his narrow back to the door. He could not see Baseball Bat. 'Who the hell are you people?' he choked. 'What do you want?'

'Who we are is immaterial,' said Business Suit. 'What we want is very simple. You fucked with the wrong woman, and I have been ordered to punish you in such a manner that you will never consider fucking with her again.'

Sam's eyes narrowed. Annalise: the bitch could have told him she was dating a sociopathic Antoine de Caunes. 'Listen,' he coughed. 'I don't know what you're talking ...'

Business Suit nodded, and Machete used his huge knife to nick the flesh of Sam's scrotum. Sam stopped speaking and went rigid. There was fear in him, but it was not the all-consuming terror he had expected.

Instead, it was a fuel that banked up the fires of rage and hatred, that had been gently swelling in him over the last day and a half. Now, they flared up in a blast of bloodlust. Sam's eyes narrowed, but that was the only sign of the maelstrom within him.

'You will not speak, or your punishment will be substantially more painful,' Business Suit said, unaware of the violent miasma that was spilling from the naked man in front of him. 'Nod if you understand.' Sam nodded his head forwards and then brought it back with all the force he could muster.

The back of his head slammed into the bridge of Machete's nose with a sickening crunch. The knife chopped down into Sam's thigh, its razor-sharp edge

easily cutting through skin and muscle. Sam felt blood spurt from the wound, but something inside him had broken out. He let it have control.

Naked and covered in his own blood, Sam's face screwed up in a savage parody of his usually gentle features. He threw himself over the groaning figure of Machete and cannoned into Baseball Bat. The man was broader and several stone heavier, but Sam knocked him backwards onto a sofa. Blood covered them both, making Sam's naked body slick and difficult to hold. At such close quarters the bat was useless. The bigger man dropped it to the floor and tried to catch Sam in a bear hug.

Ignoring the crushing pressure around his chest, Sam latched both hands around Baseball Bat's throat. He choked him with a strength he hadn't known he possessed. Baseball Bat's face went bright red and his mouth opened wide, his swollen tongue lolling out. Sam was just about to finish him off when there was a fantastic blow to the side of his head, and he was catapulted off the sofa and onto a glass coffee table, which shattered with a crash.

Raising a hand to his right temple, he felt hot liquid gushing out. A flap of skin hung down to his ear, and when he pushed at the bone, it grated like a broken eggshell. Getting to his feet, he stared around the room. Baseball Bat was sprawled on the sofa, gasping for breath, and Machete stood near him, still holding the weapon he had used to fracture Sam's skull. Business Suit still stood at the door, watching the proceedings with narrowed eyes.

Sam glimpsed his reflection in a large mirror set above the sofa, and for a moment his old self surfaced. He was aghast at what he saw.

His right leg was a wash of blood that had smeared up over his belly and chest. His pubic hair was matted and dripping. The side of his head was a concave mess. More blood gushed from the gaping wound above his ear and covered his shoulder and right arm. Sam thought he could see his brain pulsing beneath the ruined skull. As he watched, the dent pushed itself back out, and the blood flow stopped. He heard bone popping as his head reconstructed itself. Delicately, Sam pushed the flap of skin back in place and felt it writhe slightly as it sealed back to where it belonged.

Turning to the men who had attacked him, Sam smiled maliciously. 'This

isn't your day, boys,' he said in an alien, growling voice. He stepped towards Machete, who squealed with terror and swung his weapon at Sam's head. He ducked and casually batted the swinging hand aside. Reaching out with his right hand, Sam gripped Machete by the throat. He began to squeeze and heard something crunch. Sam pulled the man's throat out with a jerk, and blood sprayed onto his face and into his mouth.

Hunger took over, and Sam fell with the body. He tore a chunk out of the man's cheek with his teeth. The salty flesh slipped down into his belly and for a long time, Sam was lost in the rapture of feeding. By the time he was finished, the man was a badly mauled carcass, the flesh stripped from his arms and legs, his stomach open and stinking, and his ribs splayed and broken. Sam sat back and realised that the other two men had gone. He didn't care.

The hotel room was an abattoir. The bed and walls were covered in thick, viscous blood. The space smelled of shit and raw meat, and the coppery tang of blood was the finest aroma Sam could ever remember smelling. He was covered in the gore of his human dinner. Gently probing his leg and head, he found them whole and without wound or imperfection. Sam felt empowered; for the first time in his life, he felt real.

Humming to himself, he went to the *en-suite* bathroom and had a shower. Calmly, he reviewed the events of the last few hours. It had been a good day: he had gotten laid, had a fight, and eaten well. What more could a man ask for?

Yet sharp sanity remained; he was not completely delusional. What he had done was murder and cannibalism. Though he could no longer understand why such things were taboo, he knew that the society he lived in would judge him harshly. He would have to hide until he could work things out for himself.

Where to go? As he soaped the blood from his body, he mulled over the question. As if in answer, that strange feeling came back – the feeling that there was another person in his head with him, a dichotomy of intelligence. This time, it did not feel strange. It felt right. The connection did not bring nausea or upset, but a sense of harmony instead. He could feel that presence somewhere to the east. Not far away at all.

Getting out of the shower, Sam quickly dried himself. As he dressed, he

looked out of the hotel room window and marvelled at the darkening city. It was just after five in the evening, and dusk had settled over Manchester like a shroud.

In response, all the lights of the restaurants and bars, flats and shops had blazed into life. The roads were smears of red and white as cars whizzed along to deposit their passengers onto the Saturday night scene.

From where he stood, Sam could feel the life of the place. He could sense the hot, churning blood of the throngs so far below him. The pulse of the city was a steady beat in his gut, pulling at him, inviting him out into the night.

In that moment, Sam knew what it was to be a god, holding an entire planet on an open palm, capable of crushing it in his infinite fist on the slightest whim. Smiling to himself, he stepped over the mutilated body on the hotel room floor and went in search of the thing that was calling to him.

ROWAN

ROWAN WOKE UP SUDDENLY. THERE WAS NO FUZZY MOMENT WHILE HE TRIED TO gather his thoughts – he was fully conscious immediately. Something had disturbed him. He remained motionless, his breathing stilled, and he listened intently. There it was again – a faint thump, as if somebody had put something heavy down. His initial instinct was that burglars had invaded his home.

Poor bastards, he thought to himself. A thin smile spread across his lips. The house was left unoccupied for several months, and then some unlucky sod decided to break in the day after he got home.

He sat up silently and climbed out of bed. Quickly negotiating the dark room, he grabbed one of his dad's golf clubs from where they had been left, untouched, beside the wardrobe for the last three years. Then, because nobody likes fighting when they're naked, he pulled on a pair of boxer shorts.

Rowan had slept in late, and then spent the day catching up on some odd jobs around the house. It was nice to just lose himself: to cut himself off from the world for a little while. He had meant to phone his sister, but somehow morning slipped into afternoon, and a quick bath turned into a luxurious hour-long soak. He topped up with hot water and fell asleep, and the hour turned into two. By the time he woke up in lukewarm water, it was getting dark outside.

Ordering a pizza, Rowan found a bargain basement action movie on TV and laughed uproariously at Hollywood's interpretation of soldiering in a modern world. Feeling sleepy again, he went back to bed for an afternoon nap.

Slipping between the crisp, clean sheets of his big comfy bed had been liberating, and he had finally felt the tension of the last few months drain from him. He was home, he was healthy, and he had a couple more days doing nothing. So, when he heard movement downstairs, his grim amusement was gilded with anger. He didn't even think about calling the police.

The downstairs lights were off. Outside, the world was dark. A swollen moon cast an eldritch glow into the back garden, while the front of the house was lit brightly by the streetlamps that marched up the road.

From the top of the stairs, Rowan could see that somebody had switched on the kitchen lights. He could hear more movement. Cheeky fuckers are having a snack, he thought as he slipped downstairs silently, the golf club held ready over his right shoulder. The graphite shaft felt disappointingly light. He'd tried to persuade his dad to buy steel, but the old man hadn't listened.

Pushing his back up against the door jamb, Rowan paused for a moment outside the kitchen. He listened intently, trying to discern how many were in there.

It sounded like there was only one. Tightening his grip on the golf club, he swung into the kitchen and yelled wordlessly to scare the shit out of the intruder. His eyes raked the room, and he saw a figure next to the fridge, holding a pint of milk. Rowan stared incredulously for a few seconds and then burst out laughing. He dropped the golf club and opened his arms.

'Jesus Christ, Tabby, I thought you were a burglar.' His sister didn't answer, and it was only then that Rowan saw the bruise around the side of her mouth and

the split lip that glistened under the kitchen lights. Tabby threw herself into his arms and began to cry. ‘Shush,’ he said gently as he held her, stroking her thick hair. ‘Shush, it’s all right. I’m here.’

Through her muffled sobs, Tabby began to babble. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were home. I just needed somewhere to stay. I let myself in ... I didn’t know where else to go. I went home for a bit to see if he’d come back, but the longer I stayed, the more I realised I didn’t want him to. So, I packed a few things and came here. I brought some food to make a sandwich. I haven’t eaten – my appetite’s gone – but I thought I should do. So, I ... I ...’ Then she burst into a fresh round of sobs, and Rowan held her tight for the next few minutes while the tears exhausted themselves.

Gently, he led her through to the front room and sat her down. Then he cleared up the pizza box and took it to the kitchen. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ he shouted to her.

‘Do you have anything stronger?’

‘No – I’ve not been shopping yet.’ Rowan returned to the front room. ‘I can walk up to the off-licence if you like,’ he said.

‘I’ll come with you – I need the air ... and I don’t want to be on my own. I’m so glad you’re here.’

Rowan put some clothes on, and together they walked up to the high street. Tabby slowly told him about how Sam had been attacked and the changes that had come over him afterwards. About how they thought he would never speak again and the miraculous healing rate. Then she told him, her voice bleak, the tears banished, about how he had insulted her and finally punched her in the face. Rowan listened silently.

On the one hand, he was furious with Sam. He wanted to defend his big sister, to seek out the man who had hit her and pummel him into mincemeat. On the other hand, he could not reconcile what Tabby was telling him with the Sam he knew. The man was gentle, polite: almost stuffy. It wasn’t that he disbelieved his sister; she had never lied to him, and he knew she wouldn’t start now. It was just so out of character.

‘It doesn’t sound like Sam,’ he said when she had finished.

‘I know. He’s been under a lot of stress ...’

‘Don’t defend him. There’s no excuse.’

‘But ...’

‘I don’t want to hear it.’ The statement was flat and brooked no argument. Tabby fell silent. ‘Do you want me to ... have a word with him?’

‘No,’ she said quickly. ‘I don’t want either of you getting hurt. And I don’t want you getting into trouble.’ Rowan shrugged as if it didn’t matter. ‘No,’ she said again in a tone just as final as Rowan’s had been, seconds earlier.

‘So, what do you want to do?’

‘I want to get drunk.’

‘Well, that I can arrange.’ They reached the off-licence shortly before eight. There was a group of three young men inside, obviously drunk. Avoiding them, Tabby went and selected a bottle of wine. Rowan picked up eight bottles of beer for himself, then made his way over to the counter. The drunks had gone outside.

Rowan paid for the alcohol on his bank card while Tabby double bagged the lot into flimsy plastic bags. They walked outside. The three men were still there. One was on his mobile phone, the other two had cracked open a can each and were swearing at each other and laughing. Rowan and Tabby walked past.

‘Hey, sweetheart,’ said one, a large man in his early twenties with a skinhead haircut and a goatee. ‘How would you like to ride this?’ He pointed at his groin and thrust towards her crudely. Tabby and Rowan ignored him and walked past. The man and his friends started laughing.

‘Scum,’ Rowan said with disgust. ‘Every time I come home it seems like the place is getting more and more shit. The whole country’s turning into a ghetto.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Yes, it does.’

‘There’s nothing you can do.’

‘There should be,’ Rowan said.

Tabby smiled, and Rowan saw her wince as her split lip stung. ‘What are you going to do, little brother? Dress up as Batman and go around beating people up?’

Rowan grinned. ‘Well, I wasn’t going to bother with the costume,’ he said.

His tone became grave. ‘Seriously though, what are you going to do about Sam?’

‘I honestly don’t know. Can I stay with you for a few days?’

‘Of course you can. It’s your house as well. You stay as long as you want.’

Together, they walked back home.

MARK

IT WAS RARE FOR MARK TO HAVE A FACE-TO-FACE MEETING WITH ANY OF HIS employees. Jason was the exception, but only because Mark did not trust the portfolios Jason provided to the complex ether of the Internet. Mark had many interests that, by their nature, had to remain covert. Some were personal, most were business, but for all of them there was one simple rule: all communication was to be made through encrypted phone lines. These men met Mark Jones once and only once, in a neutral venue in which Mark took great pains to arrive unobserved.

When the front gate buzzer sounded, Mark sat still for a second. He had not been expecting anybody; least of all, Jason. Using the remote wand, Mark brought the gate’s security camera up on one of the monitors on his desk. He stared at it with suppressed anger for a few seconds. The buzzer went again, this time longer, as if the person pressing it were impatient.

‘Intercom,’ Mark snapped. When he heard it connect, he spoke again, his voice dangerously calm. ‘Sergei, what brings you here?’

Sergei’s swarthy face looked thin and sallow. His large nose appeared to quiver with suppressed emotion, and his dark eyes flashed worriedly. ‘I’m sorry to impose, Mr. Jones, but something went wrong, and I thought that you should know as soon as possible.’

‘And the very expensive encrypted phone I bought for you was not good enough for this purpose?’

Sergei winced at the anger in Mark's voice. 'I thought this might be better in person, Sir. I barely believe it ... I've spent the last few hours trying to work out what to do ... In the end, it seemed right to come and see you.'

Mark's anger was replaced with curiosity. 'Come in,' Mark said as he tapped the icon on the monitor that opened the gate. 'I'll meet you at the back door.'

Russian-born Sergei was an ex-KGB agent who had spent twenty years running around the world, doing wetwork for his Soviet masters. He had gone into business for himself when the KGB was finally disbanded in 1995.

Since then, he had become one of the most respected mercenary captains in the world, known to be reliable, discreet, and where necessary, exceedingly deadly. Sergei was obviously curious about his current five-million-US-dollar contract to babysit a young woman, but he was far too professional to ask. Besides, Mark knew that the man liked the peace and quiet that the lucrative contract provided.

Still, Mark had done a lot of research into the mercenary before hiring him, and one thing had come out through every line of investigation: Sergei had an almost psychotic resistance to fear. No matter what circumstance Sergei found himself in, he remained dead calm at all times. The worried glint in his eyes did not fill Mark with confidence. There was one obvious reason: the girl was dead. He dismissed that out of hand. It wasn't time yet – not until Monday. What else then? As he walked, a certainty began to creep over Mark.

He met Sergei at the back door, a solid oak affair with a steel core. Together they walked up to the Solar and sat down. Mark keyed all the security devices to prevent eavesdroppers listening in, then turned to Sergei.

'What's going on?'

Sergei was quiet for a moment. Then he looked at Mark with anger in his smouldering dark eyes. 'What the fuck did you send us into?'

Mark was genuinely surprised. Gone was the worried, nervous man from the gate. In his place was the dangerous mercenary. With a start, Mark realised Sergei had played him. A smile twitched at his lips. 'I told you to teach the man a lesson. You did that, I assume.'

Sergei launched himself from his chair and grabbed Mark by the throat.

Mark let him. 'That wasn't a man!'

'Let go of me, Sergei, and tell me what happened.'

Sergei pulled a wicked-looking lock knife from his suit pocket and opened it with one hand. He put the blade beneath Mark's chin and pushed it into the flesh. Mark rolled his eyes; if Sergei had been serious, he would have placed it against his carotid artery. Mark thought about stopping the man but decided to let the little act play out for a while at least.

'I'll ask the questions, you fuck,' Sergei spat. 'What was it?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Now tell me what happened, before I get upset.'

Sergei laughed and tightened his hold on Mark's throat. 'Listen, you little fruitcake. I don't mind getting paid a small fortune to watch some silly bitch you've got a crush on. Hell, I don't even mind walking into a situation that might get me killed – that's what I'm paid for. But I will not tolerate being blindsided by some sick fuck with a god complex. Now tell me what it was!' The knife's razor edge dug in deeper.

Enough was enough. His hand flashed up and fastened around Sergei's wrist. Though he hadn't been fast enough to stop the knife nicking the flesh of his throat, centuries of sword work had left Mark with an incredible grip, and he held the other man firmly.

Mark slid out of his chair, the movement lithe and graceful. Sergei tried to move with him – tried to stop Mark slipping away – but Mark had too much experience, even for the ex-KGB operative. In seconds, Sergei was held still by a ruthless wrist lock and relieved of his knife.

Mark pushed Sergei into one of the chairs, folded the knife, and put it on the table in front of the Russian. Sergei glared at him.

'Obviously, you're upset, so I'm going to overlook that little ... episode. If you come at me again though, I will kill you. Do you understand?' Sergei nodded. Hatred filled his face. 'Now, please explain what happened. I honestly haven't got a clue what you're talking about.'

Sergei stared at him, and the anger slowly drained away. Confusion replaced it. 'I believe you,' he said, rubbing his wrist.

‘I’m honoured,’ Mark said wryly.

‘I thought it must have been some sort of ... weapons test ... or something. We went in like you told us. We were going to slap the guy around for a bit, and it started off okay. We had him pinned up, and I was giving him his warning ... and then it all went wrong.’ Sergei slipped into maudlin silence.

‘Tell me,’ Mark said gently.

‘We cut him. We cut him bad. Colin had a machete, and he hit the boy in the side of the head with it so hard, he bashed his skull in. I could see his fucking brains, for Christ’s sake. It didn’t stop him. He just smiled at us. Colin screamed. I’ve never heard Colin scream. He’s ex SAS ... I’ve seen him get shot and just carry right on as if nothing had happened. But he screamed ... and then the boy ... he ...’

‘Go on,’ Mark said, not liking the way this was going.

‘The boy ... ate him. Tore his face off and began ... I’ve never seen anything like it,’ Sergei said weakly. The fear was back. His brows were furrowed, and his face was waxy.

‘He did this with a fractured skull?’ Mark demanded.

‘No, that’s the thing. That’s why we thought it was some kind of weapons test. Like a super soldier, or something – it healed. Right there in front of us, it healed. He had a nasty cut to his leg that Colin gave him. That healed as well. Almost instantly.’ Sergei shook his head as if he couldn’t believe it.

Cold sweat beaded on Mark’s face as he listened. He got his priorities straight. ‘Where’s the girl?’

‘I don’t know. It’ll take us a while to find her again.’

‘That is the priority,’ Mark said, worry writhing in his gut. ‘She has to be kept safe.’

‘What about the boy?’

‘I’ll take care of him,’ Mark said grimly. ‘I’ve dealt with similar problems before. I want all the information you have on him on my desk within the hour.’

Sergei nodded and stood up. ‘What was it?’ he asked.

‘Most likely? It was a fairy,’ Mark said. Sergei was still laughing when he left the house.

Mark returned to his office and sat down. He closed his eyes and memories descended. Once again, he was back in the fort at Mamucium. Annaea lay bruised in their rooms, and he was going in search of his friend, Octavius, with a sword in his hand.

MARCUS STORMED THROUGH THE FORT, BLINDED WITH RAGE. A RED MIST FELL over his eyes and he could only think of one thing: a man he called his friend had attacked his wife and now, Marcus would kill him.

Octavius had attacked Annaea in the stables; Marcus sprinted, hoping to find that he was still there. Those he passed stumbled out of his way with looks of consternation and fear. He saw more than one hurry off in the direction of his father's study.

It did not concern him – the only person who could order the soldiers to restrain him was his father, and this business would be dealt with long before he knew anything about it. Marcus did not think of the consequences; his anger was overwhelming.

He found Octavius in the stable with a couple of boys, teaching them how to saddle a horse. When Marcus came in, the two boys stopped paying attention and stared at him from around Octavius's lanky frame. Octavius, aware from the boys' reaction that somebody was behind him, turned around, and Marcus stepped within sword's reach of him. He saw Marcus and smiled cheerfully at his friend. Then he saw the sword and his brow tightened in confusion.

'Marcus,' he said lightly. 'Why do you have a sword?'

Marcus bellowed his wrath and plunged the blade through his friend's stomach. There was a moment of resistance as the skin drew taut, but then it gave way. Octavius let out a low moan of broken disbelief. Blood gushed from the deep stomach wound and splashed to the hay that blanketed the floor. The two boys began to scream, and they ran past Marcus towards the door.

Octavius fell backwards, clutching his stomach. Marcus wrenched the blade out as he fell, and a fresh gout of dark blood spilled out. A stink came with it.

Octavius looked up at Marcus from the floor, his eyes dull with pain. ‘Why?’ he gasped. ‘Marcus, why?’

Marcus lifted the sword, preparing to slash Octavius’s head from his body. A hand fell on his shoulder and tried to pull him backwards. Marcus did not know how the soldiers had got to him so quickly, and he didn’t care. He would not be denied.

Spinning, he whipped the sword around in a vicious neck-high slash. At the last moment he saw who had touched him, and his scream of rage went higher, changing in pitch to one of fear. He tried to pull the blow, but it was too late, and the blade bit into the side of Annaea’s neck just below her chin.

For a second they stared at each other in disbelief. Then she choked, and blood welled up from between her perfect lips and flowed freely down her chest, quickly drenching her yellow dress. The light of life slipped from her eyes, and Marcus was left staring into her dead, accusing face.

‘No,’ he whispered in bewilderment. Then, ‘No!’ The word echoed around the stable and out into the fort, like a wolf’s howl at the full moon. Everybody within hearing stopped and looked towards the stables with superstitious dread.

He had killed her. For a minute it didn’t sink in, and all he could do was stare at his dead wife and listen to Octavius’s dying moans. ‘You’ve killed me, Marcus,’ he said weakly. ‘Why have you killed me?’ Finally, Octavius gasped a long, stagnant breath and made no more noise.

Marcus barely noticed. Mad with grief, he dropped the sword and ran back to his apartments. The soldier was still stood on the door where he had left him. The man’s eyes widened when he saw the blood spattered across Marcus’s face and chest.

‘You let her out!’ Marcus bawled at him. ‘Why did you let her out?’

‘Your pardon, Sir, but nobody’s gone in or out since you left here.’

‘Liar!’ Marcus accused as he barged past the soldier and into his room. It was empty. He went out again and slapped the man. ‘You lie – you must have let her out.’

‘Sir, on my honour, nobody passed.’ Marcus remembered Octavius’ confused look and Annaea’s yellow dress ... she had been wearing a white dress with a

broken strap. She must have changed, but she would have had to change so quickly ... and her bruises ... where were her bruises? Pushing the thoughts from his mind, Marcus left the cowering soldier and returned to the stable. He grabbed a coil of rope, which he slung over one shoulder, and then he picked up Annaea's corpse and carried her out.

Nobody tried to stop him as he made his way over to the oak tree where they had used to picnic together, sitting and laughing. He placed Annaea's dead body against the trunk, so it appeared that she was sitting up, and then he cast the rope over a thick branch and carefully wove a noose. He climbed the tree and placed the noose over his head. Then he jumped off.

Wind rushed by his ears and his stomach lurched in the brief moment before his neck snapped.

BACK IN HIS STUDY, MARK JERKED AWAKE. SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN HIS BACK. Standing, he made his way to the dark kitchen and drank a glass of cold water. Slowly the images evaporated, and with them the pain faded. His hatred for the fairy folk surged again, and he thought about what Sergei had said.

The boy had to be one of them. Rapid healing and a penchant for human flesh? Possibly a Svartálfar; it sounded a bit like one, though he thought they'd died out. Mark grinned coldly. He had three in his sights now. The boy would go first though. A Svartálfar; it would be far too dangerous to let him survive until Monday. First though, he had to find the girl.

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WALKING THROUGH THE FORESTS OF THE TOWER AT DAWN WAS PLEASANT,

though if anybody had asked Cam, he would have denied it. The verdant foliage hid chattering squirrels and chirruping birds, and the smells of the forest were deep and rich and full of life.

The entire experience was relaxing and invigorating at the same time – the forest welcomed him, just as Grímnir had said. Cam had not walked this path for over a decade, and he had quite forgotten how peaceful it was. He fought the feeling. He would not return.

Ahead, Dow walked with a fluid grace that Cam could only envy. Catching vines and long grass didn't seem to bother the Elf. Grímnir strode through the undergrowth with a complete disregard for any tangle of plants that got in his way: he simply stepped through them, and they invariably parted before him. The bag holding the chainsaw was slung casually over his left shoulder.

Cam did his best to follow the narrow game track they were on, but every so often a mischievous thorn bush reached out to snag at his jeans or coat, and he was forced into a twirling dance to avoid ripping the fabric. When this happened, the noise of the squirrels and the birds rose in a crescendo that sounded suspiciously like laughter. Cam would grumble and pick the offending thorn gently away, unwilling to damage it, though he didn't know why, and then dutifully traipse after his companions.

The canopy of the forest was thick, but occasionally the track widened, and he could see up through the treetops. Cam stepped out into one of these clearings and found that the waist-high mat of ferns and flowers gave way to a rolling area of loam and springy grass that smelled sweet and fresh.

The magnificent sky of The Tower at Dawn shone above the clearing. Feathers of rosy cloud were scattered across a backdrop of yellow so pale, it was almost white. A mass of them bunched and tumbled off to the east. Farther away on the horizon, the clouds were lit from behind in vivid reds by the rising sun. They glowed like a Turner oil painting, but deeper, richer ... more alive. A true Tequila sunrise; Cam realised he was thirsty.

The dawn here was eternal, and the golden light that flooded the forest remained constant and without change. The sun remained lost just out of sight, an anonymous débutante at its own cotillion ball, its eternal beau a pleasant chill

that nipped from the crisp air. There was no midday or afternoon, no evening or night at The Tower at Dawn – the sun never crept shyly higher, nor did it sink coquettishly lower. The home of the creatures of Earth and Water was a place out of time, suspended in the perfect moment of a perfect sunrise.

The small party moved on beneath the bewitching sky. After about half an hour, they came to the tree line. Behind them, the forest meandered away in a convex haze.

Ahead of them, a squat seven-storey turret stood in the middle of a meadow of grass, daisies, and bluebells. It was a wide, round building that reminded Cam of Manchester's Central Library. Between the ivy that almost covered it, Cam could see it was made of white stone. Fifty or sixty large glassless windows were set into the walls. At its base, facing Cam and his companions across the meadow, was a large, wooden double door. The doors were open and judging by the red and white roses that had grown between them, they had not been closed in a long time. A domed white roof reflected the sunrise in a dazzling kaleidoscope of burnished gold.

The meadow that spread out in front of the turret embraced a wide ring of standing stones. Within them was nothing but grass, but around them, all sorts of benches and chairs had been set up beside tables and the occasional throw rug. They were neglected and dirty. There was a sadness about the place – a desolation and abandonment – that clutched at Cam's unwilling heart.

Beyond the turret, there was nothing but the edge – a drop into the shimmering void. From where he stood, Cam looked out past the turret and the edge of The Tower at the columns of vermilion cloud that masked the rising sun. It glowed through a particularly thick bank of cumulus. It was a much deeper red, and Cam felt as if a great cataract-blinded eye was staring at him, like the confused gaze of a melancholy god. Cam shuddered and turned his attention back to the turret.

The Tower was a mystery, and Cam couldn't help but stare. Every time he made this journey, he had to look around and convince himself this place was real, not because of its beauty, but because the whole vast forest was set atop the flat roof of The Tower.

Many first-time visitors mistakenly believed the ivy-clad turret was The Tower. They were wrong; the forest at his back, the meandering streams, and the great, lush, verdant plains that stretched off back the way they had come had grown with wild abandon on a circular roof, twenty-five miles in diameter. The turret rose out of The Tower proper, a final few storeys built up on top of the possibly infinite structure below. There were more of these turrets scattered around the circumference of the edge, but only this one was inhabited now.

In a fundamental divergence from human logic, the fairy folk counted the roof as the first floor and then counted one higher as they went down each level. The reason behind this was simple – nobody had ever found The Tower’s bottom. Therefore, it was impossible to know how many floors it had. Beneath their feet, endless winding corridors, dark and cut off from the sunlight, descended into the unknown.

Philosophers had spent millennia theorising about how big The Tower really was. Many speculated that it was infinite and floated unsupported in empty space. Cam could believe it. As a child, he had occasionally gone to the edge of the roof forest and looked down. The grey stone stretched away for an unimaginable distance before it disappeared into the haze of cloud that lapped at it. If you looked out from The Tower, all you would ever see was cloud. There were no other Towers. It hung alone, suspended in a perfect morning. Maybe the Firstcomers knew what it really was, but they were all gone now.

The Tower was so large that it had once held tens of millions of the fairy folk. Now, as tragedy after tragedy had whittled away their numbers, the remnants of the Elves and Jötnar lived in the turret ahead. Dow and Grímnir were already moving towards the entrance, and Cam had to hurry to catch up. As was proper, they skirted the stone circle as they walked to the door.

Passing beneath the rose-framed lintel led them into a huge marble greeting hall.

The eternal dawn burned through a bank of windows. Cam could see the dilapidated glory of the place by the rose-coloured light. A huge stone fountain sat dry and silent in the middle of the room. It was designed as a series of steps descending into a shallow pool, around which statues of playful-looking pixies

lounge and splashed, each holding out a golden urn.

At the centre of the pool there was a plinth. On it, a male and female Elf, both stone, both naked, held a tree branch upright between them. The branch was funnelled, and Cam guessed that it was open at the top. He had no idea where the water was supposed to come from, because he had never seen it working.

To their right, a wide marble staircase began a long spiral up to each mezzanine level. It had a thick balustrade decorated with happy animals, dancing pixies, and cavorting fairies. In the ceiling three storeys above the fountain, a massive crystal chandelier hung and glittered in the morning light. Several birds' nests were scattered amongst the candelabra. There was no other furniture or decoration in the beautiful room.

'I remember when the fountain worked. Its waters brushed the chandelier,' Dow said whimsically.

'I remember when this place was full of life and colour, when the two races met outside for dancing and games of speed and strength, when serious discussion could give way to sparring in seconds,' Grímnir said. 'I remember when magic flashed around this hall like fireworks, and the laughter of children brought the walls alive. I remember when this was the hub of our society.' He said it with such sadness that Cam felt his heartstrings tugged again.

Angrily, Cam turned on the two of them. 'Well, this is all I will ever remember. A dead place for a dead people. Now let's do whatever it is we're supposed to do and get the hell out of here. This place makes me want to puke.' He uncapped his canteen and took a fortifying swig of vodka.

'Such anger in one so young. But then, anger is the bastion of the young, for they have not had the time to learn how transient and weak it is.'

Unnoticed, a tall Elf had moved into sight at the top of the first flight of stairs. He was dressed in a white robe that looked a bit grubby to Cam. His hair was long and black, but his features held the same unearthly beauty of Cam and Dow. His face looked to be no more than Cam's thirty, but his words and bearing made him seem much older.

'Dow Sé Mochaomhog, I see you have returned to us with the old one. Who is this other? I feel I should recognise him.'

‘This is Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha, the son of Manannán Ó Gríobhtha.’

‘Ah yes, I knew you as a child, boy. Though to me a child you remain, despite your man’s body.’ The Elf walked down the stairs towards them as he spoke.

‘Hello Master Creachmhaoil,’ Cam said awkwardly.

‘Do you remember anything I taught you, boy?’ He didn’t give Cam a chance to answer. ‘By the looks of you, no. Your poor father is distraught at the path you have taken, young Camhlaidh.’ Cam felt anger at the words and wanted to shout at the Elf that he didn’t give a shit about his father’s opinion, or anybody else’s for that matter. Instead, he looked down at his shuffling feet and kept his peace. Master Creachmhaoil had been his teacher when he still visited The Tower, and old habits die hard.

Creachmhaoil turned to Grímnir and smiled. ‘So finally, you have returned to us. Your arrival is a great boon – the magics used to give you strength ...’ The Elf idly reached out and ran a smooth hand across the tattoos visible around Grímnir’s neck in a slightly possessive, almost sexual manner. ‘... gives us much hope.’

Grímnir dropped the bag containing the chainsaw to the floor. Then he reached out and took the Elf’s hand, gently pulling it away from his flesh.

Creachmhaoil looked slightly surprised to find that he had been touching Grímnir at all. ‘The magics I possess are for the slaying of Cú Roí. They have no other purpose. I must speak with the Maiden of Earth and Water.’

‘Just a second,’ Cam said. ‘What do you mean “gives us much hope”?’

The others ignored him, and he bristled. ‘We can help you find the Maiden of Earth and Water,’ said Creachmhaoil, ‘but please, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir, think about what the power could mean to us. You have seen how it is; our race is dying. Your sacrifice could buy us valuable time.’

‘What are you all talking about?’ Cam shouted.

Creachmhaoil gave him a withering look, and Cam felt a wash of embarrassment. It was quickly replaced by a sulky anger – he wasn’t a child, and he shouldn’t be treated like one. He stopped shouting though.

‘My duty is clear. I cannot be released from it. Now, take me to the Maiden

of Earth and Water.’

Creachmhaoil sighed. ‘She has retreated ... below. She went seven years ago, seeking answers to The Transmogrification, and never returned. We don’t know where she is. We fear the worst.’

‘Then I will go after her,’ Grímnir responded.

‘You do not understand the dangers,’ Creachmhaoil said. ‘This is not The Tower you remember. The magic is fading, and the lower levels are perilous. Warped things lurk there now, monsters that thrive on death and pain. Stay here, let us use your magic. Maybe then we can bring some order back ...’

‘No,’ Grímnir said flatly. ‘I must go.’

Creachmhaoil nodded his head sadly. ‘There is nothing we can do to stop you. All I ask is that you think on what I have said. Dow Sè Mochaomhog will travel with you as guide and comrade. Of all of us, he has travelled most extensively in the lower levels. You will find suitable weapons and clothing upstairs. Will you show him please?’ he asked Dow. Dow nodded and moved off. Grímnir picked up his bag and followed.

Cam made to go with them, but Creachmhaoil stopped him with a gesture. When Dow and Grímnir had vanished, the older Elf turned to Cam. ‘You have spent the last few days with Grímnir Vafthrúdnir.’

‘Yes,’ Cam said warily.

‘What do you think of him?’

‘He’s big and ugly, and obsessed with killing Cú Roí. I don’t think he really understands that it doesn’t matter in the long run – we’ll all be dead in fifty years anyway.’ Cam said the last bitterly.

‘Quite so. Do you understand what I was saying earlier? About the magic?’

‘No.’

‘Those tattoos were etched into his flesh back when the magic was strong – so strong that miracles were commonplace. They were traced into him to give him power over Cú Roí, and they still contain that power. There is magic in those tattoos, some say the power of the Maiden herself – a Seed lain away for when The Tower at Dawn needs it the most. The Seed, if properly stored and rationed, could give us another century, possibly two. By that time, who knows

what might have happened – the humans could have annihilated themselves.’

‘They won’t. They’re like cockroaches,’ Cam said miserably. ‘Trust me, I know.’

‘Still, it gives us time, and we need time. We need the magic. We need the Seed.’

‘So, what’s this got to do with me?’ Cam asked suspiciously.

‘You heard him,’ Creachmhaoil said. ‘He is intractable. But you have known him longer than any of us.’

‘By a day,’ Cam said with a laugh. ‘We’re not exactly bosom buddies.’

‘You are the best we have. You might be able to persuade him.’

‘Well, I’ll try,’ Cam said doubtfully. ‘I suppose I can have a word with him, but I think he’ll want to be going as soon as he’s changed.’

‘That is why you must go with him.’

Cam stared at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. ‘You’re kidding, right? Me? Down there?’ He gestured absently at the marble floor. ‘I wouldn’t last five minutes.’

‘You must try – the future of our race depends on it.’

‘No,’ Cam said flatly. He took another swig from his canteen and Creachmhaoil lashed out, knocking it from his mouth.

‘You are a disgrace, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha. It pains me to see what you have become. You have no feelings except self-pity and greed. You resent us for your short life, and yet you do nothing to help. You are pathetic. Get out of my sight.’

Cam stood and stared at his old teacher in shock. He had never seen Master Creachmhaoil lose his temper. The words echoed in the great hall, and Cam heard his father’s words again. *I have indulged your childish excesses for too long. It is time for you to grow up. You have a duty to your people, and your shameful behaviour over the last decade has embarrassed me and discredited you. You are not a human, and your insistence that you are is pathetic ... You have abandoned your race, Camhlaidh. We still strive to solve this problem, but we are few and the work goes slowly. Rather than help, you allow yourself to rot away ...*

Cam watched the vodka glug out of the canteen and onto the marble floor, and in it, he saw his life slowly dribbling away. 'I'll do it,' he said and instantly regretted the words. Once said, they could not be taken back.

Creachmhaoil smiled. 'Good. That is good. Go and find some clothing ... and a weapon. Yes, you'll need a weapon.'

In a daze, Cam turned to follow his companions up the stairs. Before he had gone one step, he turned and hurried back to his canteen. He picked it up and found it to be a quarter full. Clutching it to his breast, he followed Dow and Grímnir up the stairs.

Samuel

SATURDAY NIGHT. IT WAS A MAGICAL TIME IN THE CITY CENTRE. NOT THE Disney magic of perfect princesses and happy endings, of triumph over adversity, of vibrant colours and cute sidekicks: this was the base magic of the human soul. This was a magic born of lust and greed and excess.

It was early evening when Sam left the hotel, strolling out of the huge glass foyer with a hungry smile and a jaunty step. Even then, with the sun just set, there was an atmosphere that clung to the streets. Sam could smell it amidst the fumes, beneath the perfumes and aftershaves of the thronged street. It was the smell of violence.

He walked the city. The pull in his head was not urgent and he sensed that, whatever it was, it wanted him to explore for a while, to see the maggot crowds of humanity with the fresh eyes of a demigod.

Sam watched the kids in the Castlefield Amphitheatre, their raucous cries and drunken frolics made dangerous by the BMX bikes and skateboards they threw themselves around on.

One of the skateboarders took a particularly nasty tumble, and Sam's

delighted laughter rang out clear and sharp. The skateboarder, a white boy of about seventeen with greasy brown dreadlocks and some painful-looking facial piercing, stormed over to Sam.

‘What the fuck are you laughing at?’ the boy demanded in a whiny tone that Sam might have found threatening yesterday. To the new Sam, the boy sounded foolish and petulant. Sam laughed again.

‘Fuck you, I’ll beat the shit out of you,’ the boy threatened.

The need to commit quick and personal violence surged through Sam, and he looked up at the boy, his face twisting viciously. The boy looked into his eyes and his mouth dropped open. He turned and ran. His friends watched, bemused, and Sam stared at them until they, too, drifted away in discomfort.

Laughing once more, Sam moved on. The pavement outside a large pub was crowded with people. A phalanx of bouncers wearing black guarded the doors.

On one side of the big men was a small queue to get in, on the other, a mass of inadequately dressed people smoking and talking. Sam spotted a pretty girl with pigtails in a ridiculously short skirt. She was dressed like a schoolgirl, and something ugly in Sam rolled over and took an interest.

‘Hello,’ he said to her with a smile. She looked at him and dismissed him out of hand, not even bothering to answer him. She was about ten years his junior, and up close, he saw acne on her cheeks. It had been inexpertly covered with a foundation much too dark for her skin. ‘You shouldn’t ignore me, you know. It’s impolite,’ he said.

‘Look, just fuck off, will you?’ she snapped at him.

‘Well aren’t you the feisty one?’ Sam asked. ‘I tell you what, why don’t you come down that alleyway with me, and I’ll make all your dreams come true.’

The girl looked at him with such loathing, Sam felt the hackles rise on the back of his neck in perverted pleasure. ‘Go away, or I’ll get my boyfriend to sort you out.’

‘Boyfriend? And which one is he?’

‘Jamie!’ the schoolgirl shouted. A large man of around twenty detached himself from another group of smokers and walked over. He had broad shoulders and massive arms and moved in the odd primate manner of someone who works

their upper torso to the detriment of their lower body strength.

Jamie stopped in front of Sam, eyeing him up and down disinterestedly. 'What?'

'This guy's bothering me. He wants to take me down a back alley.'

Jamie stared at Sam with a bored expression. 'Maybe if you didn't dress like that, blokes wouldn't pester you,' he said, then he looked at Sam. 'Come on mate, get lost, will you? I don't want any trouble.'

Sam smiled. 'Of course, my apologies.' He turned and walked away as the schoolgirl began to scream, her voice high-pitched and coarse. 'I'll dress anyway I want to, Jamie! Fuck you!' Sam laughed as the domestic escalated.

He moved onwards, past the sort of pond life Sam would have crossed the road to avoid two days ago. As he walked, he stared at them, fascinated. He had never really looked before, had never taken the time to notice these strange, alien life forms in expensive t-shirts and jeans, their hair cut just so, their faces set in grim lines.

There were large groups of violent-looking men, all a similar size and shape to Jamie. Gaggles of drunken females, in garish pink and yellow tutus, low-cut tops and high-cut skirts, stumbled around. Some of the girls were slim and exotic, but most were obese and repugnant.

One specimen fell out of a taxi and bent over right in front of Sam to fix an errant knee-high boot. Sam was treated to the sight of a black thong, so deeply embedded between the glutinous cheeks of the fat girl's arse, it might as well have not been there.

A young man dressed like Wonder Woman skipped past, asking everybody to high-five him. Sam hit his hand so hard, the gunshot crack made several nearby policemen in high-visibility jackets look around in alarm. Wonder Woman-man yelped and clasped his sore palm between two Lycra-clad thighs.

Outside a club, another squad of doormen forcibly ejected a young man with a shaved head and the ubiquitous big arms. The young man stood up and began yelling abuse at the doormen. The police rushed over and bundled him away before anybody got hurt. Sam watched, entranced.

There was a roar and the sudden noise of heavy bass, and then four Asian

males, crammed into a black Ferrari, passed Sam on the street. The front passenger hung out of the window, shouting abuse at Wonder Woman-man. Sam heard his friends laughing.

This was his new kingdom, and these were his new subjects. He could feel the fugue of confused displacement in them. He sensed how much they needed to find something – anything – in the dark streets of Manchester. The ugly girls looking for love, or failing that, a quick feel; the tough guys trying to impress their mates with crap passes at the few beautiful girls; the beautiful girls at a premium, flaunting their wares and trying to catch the eye of a wannabe gangster; the wannabe gangsters wanting desperately to be respected, threatening bouncers and talking too loudly.

Bored, he wandered on. Eventually he found himself beneath the looming presence of Piccadilly Station. It was nearly eleven. The night-time traffic whirred past him, taillights a kaleidoscopic mirage of trailing red lines. A constant whir of engines and burbling voices was punctuated by the rattle of trains passing overhead and the occasional screech of their brakes. The station was busy with people and taxis.

He watched the abandoned building opposite him – that was where the presence was. He could hear the Siren's call. It was time to meet his Master.

Sam stepped into the road. A Ferrari came up too fast. The driver saw Sam at the last minute and slammed the brakes on. The car came to shuddering halt only a few inches from Sam's knees. There was a moment of stillness, and then the doors opened, and the front-seat passenger stormed out of the car.

'What the fuck are you doing, you vanilla-faced fuck?' the passenger called. He was about twenty, slim, with spiked black hair and thin lips. It was the same Ferrari from earlier, Sam noted disinterestedly.

The driver, a burly skinhead in a tight black t-shirt, got out of the car. 'What the fuck – what are you doing getting in my way?' he shouted over Spiky Hair.

The two back-seat passengers, who must have been very cramped since the front seats had been ratcheted back until they were practically horizontal, also got out and stretched their legs.

The heavy bassline of the music still blared from the Ferrari. One of the

back-seat passengers wore a pink polo shirt, the other had a sleek mobile phone hung around his neck by a chain. They joined their friends at the front of the car. Both carried open bottles of beer. A waft of cannabis came from the open doors; Sam wrinkled his nose at the pungent aroma.

Sam tried to walk past them. A big arm blocked his way. ‘Where the fuck do you think you’re going, snowdrop?’ Skinhead demanded.

‘He’s fucking pissed. You should have run the fucker over,’ said Spiky Hair. Pink Polo Shirt and Mobile Phone laughed as if this was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

Sam tried to push past. ‘Stay there,’ Skinhead said. Sam turned to face him. He stretched out an arm and put his hand on the car’s bonnet. It was hot to the touch.

‘Nice car,’ he said conversationally, his calm voice concealing the rage slowly consuming him.

Skinhead reached out and pushed him. Sam swayed. ‘Get off my fucking car,’ Skinhead said.

‘Say, how much does a paint job on one of these things cost?’

‘What?’ Skinhead asked, confused. Sam dug a finger in and scored a massive white line straight down the middle of the wide bonnet with a preternaturally strong fingernail.

‘You fucking cunt,’ Skinhead shouted.

‘I’m getting that a lot, at the moment,’ Sam said with a self-deprecating smile.

‘He just keyed the car!’ Pink Polo Shirt shouted in alarm. ‘We didn’t get insurance – the rental company’s going to take our deposit!’

‘Rental?’ Sam asked and then began to laugh. Cars were piling up behind the Ferrari. A horn sounded, then another.

‘You’re dead,’ Skinhead hissed. Sam nodded at Skinhead and his friends, and then he turned and ran.

He heard the Ferrari’s engine gun from behind him. Running felt natural. He upped his pace to a sprint and laughed out loud with the joy of it. He did not feel tired or sweaty, he did not experience the stab of a stitch or the burn of acid

reflux, and his limbs were immune to cramp.

Sam kept running. He could hear the men in the Ferrari whooping and laughing. The occasional taunt made it over the growl of the engine – they thought he was trying to escape.

Soon he was in the dystopian back streets behind the train station. This area was commonly understood to be one of the city's red-light districts. It was dark and industrial. The only people who came here were prostitutes and their punters, and none of them wanted anything to do with the police.

Something hissed past his head, and he glanced over his shoulder. The passenger – Spiky Hair – had another empty bottle of beer in his hand. 'That's it you fucker – keep running.' He threw the second bottle, and it narrowly missed Sam's head. The people in the car laughed raucously. The Ferrari kept pace with Sam; obviously, they were happy to torment him and run him to ground.

Sam stopped and the car overshot him. He crossed quickly from left to right. The car reversed. 'Come back, prick,' one of the passengers shouted. Sam started running again. There was a grinding noise as reverse was slammed into first, and then the howl of the engine as the Ferrari set off after him again.

A rough-looking woman, with skimpy clothes and bad teeth, stared at him blankly as he sprinted past her. He could hear the Ferrari still hot on his heels. He darted right, into a car park, and ran quickly to the centre. It was dark in the middle of the tarmac expanse, and Sam stopped. He wasn't even breathing hard. The Ferrari's headlights lit up the car park as it turned in.

The car pulled up a few feet from Sam, and the occupants poured out. 'What the fuck? Did you think you could outrun a Ferrari? You stupid fucking prick.' The four men walked towards him, Skinhead at the front. Sam waited patiently. Skinhead stopped a foot from Sam.

Skinhead lashed out at him, his fist slamming into Sam's face. Sam felt it, but it was as if the sensation came from a distance. He registered the impact, but he did not feel pain, nor did he feel any need to move. It was like being hit by a wet sponge.

'The problem with you lot,' he said as he casually reached out and gripped Skinhead by the throat, 'is that you do not recognise a demigod when you see

one.’ Sam tossed the bigger man to the ground.

‘What?’ Spiky Hair whined. His eyes were wide, and they were stuck on Skinhead who was lying on the ground holding his throat.

‘Why are you driving around like this anyway? The cost of renting this thing ... and the petrol ... it’d be cheaper to go and have a few drinks. You might actually meet someone the old-fashioned way, rather than trying to pick up some poor little bitch, too pissed to know what she’s doing. That’s what you’re up to, right? It’s pathetic.’

Skinhead had gotten back to his feet. His face was a mask of anger. Sam was enjoying himself. ‘I’m warning you,’ Skinhead said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

‘What? You’re going to assault my fingers with your throat again? I like this car; I think I’m going to keep it.’

‘I’m going to kill you,’ said Skinhead.

‘You’d be surprised at how hard that is.’ Sam looked at the men and realised he was already bored. ‘Go on, get lost before I decide to actually hurt you.’

Skinhead marched up to him and started waving his hands around in Sam’s face. ‘I’m not some little bitch, you know. I’ll fucking kill you. You can’t come over here and threaten me. Do you know who I am? Do you?’ Spiky Hair and Pink Polo Shirt came and grabbed Skinhead by the arms to hold him back. Sam watched the act with bemusement. ‘You motherfucker,’ Skinhead raged on. ‘You white motherfucker. You pansy ass, queer fucking bastard. You think you’re hard; you think you’re some kind of hard man – I’ll fucking smoke you.’ A fleck of spittle landed on Sam’s face.

‘Go home. You’re getting boring.’

‘Boring? I’ll show you fucking boring – I’ll show your wife fucking boring. I’ll stuff my fucking cock in her mouth, you homo bastard. I’ll ...’

Sam had stopped listening. With the mention of his wife, amusement had tripped over into pure, unadulterated rage. His face twisted up, and a low growl issued from his throat. He fixed his eyes on Skinhead, who met his gaze and stopped speaking. Fear crossed his face.

‘Fuck, look at his eyes,’ Mobile Phone mumbled from behind them.

‘Let him go,’ Sam said to Spiky Hair and Pink Polo Shirt. ‘Let him go and then start running, because as soon as I’m done with him, I’m coming for you. That’ll give you maybe ten seconds. Run and hide.’ The other three turned and ran back across the car park together. ‘You want to fight me? You’ve got your wish,’ Sam said in a harsh voice.

‘I don’t want to fight you,’ Skinhead said. A thick waft of urine rose from the man.

‘Too late,’ Sam said.

‘Please?’ Skinhead begged softly. Sam snarled. Skinhead’s screams were cut off before they even started. Then Sam went after the others.

MARK

‘GIVE ME AN UPDATE.’

‘We still haven’t found the girl.’

Mark pursed his lips at Sergei’s words. ‘Keep trying. What about Autumn?’

‘Not yet.’

Mark changed gear and overtook a BMW. The Corvette’s engine roared as it sped past. Restless and unhappy, Mark had been unable to stay in the house, so he had taken the car and driven towards Manchester. He wanted to be close when Sergei’s team found Sam Autumn. The black sword was on what passed for a back seat.

‘Are there any other addresses where he could be?’

‘We have them all watched.’

‘His bank accounts?’

‘Those too. I will call you as soon as we know something. What do you want to do about the girl when we find her?’

‘Contact me immediately, but just keep her under observation. I want to be there when we bring her in – I can’t do that until I have dealt with Autumn.’

‘Did the portfolio help?’

‘Not really.’ Mark had read through the information Sergei had on Autumn. To all intents and purposes, he was a normal human being. He had been living as a human for decades and had a complete history including school, and more importantly, medical. Everything said he was human. Mark could not understand how Autumn had got away with his subterfuge for so long.

All his previous targets had been shadowy things, living as much off the grid as possible. Autumn seemed to embrace humanity. It was only when he had been attacked and his powers of healing were revealed, that he had shown his true nature.

What was truly disturbing was the timing and the creature’s proximity to the girl. It was too much of a coincidence, and Mark was certain that this was all some elaborate game designed to cause him more pain. The malice of the fairy creatures could not be underestimated – they had proved that to him.

AFTER HIS FIRST ATTEMPT AT SUICIDE, MARCUS REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS STILL swinging from the tree. He could only have blacked out for a second, but a figure stood beneath him. He tried to call her name, but the rope cut deep into his throat, leaving him unable to speak.

Instead, he reached out a plaintive hand towards her and hope burst in his chest. It was Annaea, standing there without a mark on her, a smile on her face. Marcus struggled to get down. He reached up and attempted to pull himself out of the noose; he was not strong enough, and the pain was enormous.

Annaea watched him for a moment. Something about her was wrong – something in her eyes. As Marcus watched, the edges of her form became hazy and indistinct. It was as if she were covered in a fine dust and a wind had sprung up to blow it away. Tendrils of matter brushed off her, flowing away from her face and body. Marcus swung helplessly from the rope and watched as another form appeared beneath that of his wife.

For a moment, the haze of dust hung in the air next to the woman it had

sloughed from. It left a ghostly image hanging in the winter sun. Marcus felt the wrench of heartbreak as he watched that ethereal image of Annaea slowly disappear.

With the Glamour relinquished, Marcus saw the creature that had been masquerading as Annaea. It was the woman from the stone circle – the woman who had called herself the Maiden of Earth and Water. She gestured lazily at the noose and the knot unravelled, pitching Marcus to the ground. Almost immediately, he felt a jarring rasp as the bones reset themselves, and his crushed windpipe crunched back into shape. A brief tingling sensation washed over the flesh of his neck as the rope burns healed.

Marcus stood up and faced the Maiden of Earth and Water. Annaea's corpse was still propped against the tree, her eyes staring, her greying face shocked. He looked away instantly, the gorge rising at the back of his throat. 'You made me kill my wife,' he said, the hatred in his voice almost tangible.

'I made you do nothing,' she replied in the beautiful voice Marcus remembered. 'You could have spoken to Octavius. You could have had him arrested and tried, according to your laws, and in doing so the truth would have become clear. Instead you sought instant retribution.'

'You tricked me!' he cried. She just smiled. 'Why? Why have you done this to me?'

She cocked her head to one side. Her green eyes glimmered. 'I told you there would be a price. Power always comes with a price. Now you have begun to pay ... It is not for you to understand why I ask this price – not yet. Not now. For now, simply understand that your wish has been granted.'

'Wish? What wish?'

'For immortality. I think you'll agree that I kept my promise. Your recent suicide proves that.'

Marcus massaged his neck. It was true, he had heard his neck snap. He had felt death wash over him. Why was he still standing there, breathing and arguing with a crazed fairy woman? 'I can't die?'

'No,' she said happily. 'You will live forever, just as you wanted.'

'I don't want this! I don't want to live with what I have done. I don't want to

live without her.’ His voice broke as he spoke.

Tears ran down his cheeks, and misery settled over him like a shroud. He remembered the blood seeping from between Annaea’s lips. He remembered the laughter as they sat beneath the oak from which he had tried to hang himself. He remembered her smile, and it shattered his soul. The knowledge that she was gone was a physical blow, a sucker punch that he didn’t think he would ever recover from. A hole bored itself into his heart. It could never be filled.

‘You are so much more than you realise,’ the Maiden of Earth and Water said quietly, contemplatively.

Something in her words cut through his grief. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

She did not answer immediately. When she spoke again, it appeared that she had decided not to answer him. ‘Unfortunately, the price I demand is death.’ Carefully, she explained the full cruelty of the torture she had planned for him, and his screams brought the guards running. By the time they arrived, the Maiden of Earth and Water had disappeared.

‘MR. JONES?’ THE VOICE SNAPPED HIM BACK OUT OF THE PAST.

‘What?’ he demanded briskly.

‘I’m sorry, I thought we had lost the connection.’

‘Once you find her, don’t let the girl out of your sight, Sergei. I will come as soon as Autumn has been put down.’ He cancelled the connection and concentrated on driving.

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CAM CHECKED HIS WATCH. IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN THE REAL WORLD. HERE ON THE Tower, it was still dawn. Buttery sunlight splashed over the balustrade and through the hundred feet of arches that dominated the eastern wall of the room. Beyond the arches there was a balcony. Cam could see hazy bubbles of cloud floating indolently in front of a broader ice cream curl that diffused the rising sun.

Huge stone tables cluttered the room, each with a granite bench on both sides. He reasoned that this must have once been a banqueting hall, where his ancestors had feasted and cavorted and done all the other things fairies do.

The friezes and carvings along the walls showed forest scenes and beautiful creatures hunting with bows and spears. The floor was a huge mosaic, portraying herds of deer at a distance. In the centre of the room was a massive hearth with a rusting spit thrown across it. The entire room was the purest white, except for the green of the mosaic. The dawn sun glittered off the pale surfaces, casting a weird shine across the room.

This hall was at the edge of The Tower, and as such, sunlight streamed into it. They had kept to the edge so far, lingering in the light, but as soon as they made their way into the interior of The Tower where there were no windows, Cam knew they would be in complete darkness. He shuddered and looked to his companions for encouragement. Grímnir stood by a throne at the end of the room. It was big and white and looked very uncomfortable. ‘This is where she sat when she blessed me for my quest,’ he said. Grímnir didn’t have to raise his deep voice for his words to carry through the still silence, to where Cam was standing across the hall. The big man sounded melancholy – it suited this place.

He did not have to ask who Grímnir meant. The Maiden of Earth and Water’s presence could still be felt, like the scent of lavender after a warm summer rain. The way the roiling sun hit the edges of the empty hall gave the room a sense of quiet desolation, completely at odds with the tidiness of the place.

It was the quiet, Cam decided, not just in this hall but in the whole Tower. The only sounds were his heavy breathing and the occasional scrape of his boots. The other two made no noise at all. It made his flesh crawl, and he longed for his hip flask of vodka. He had put it down in the armoury and forgotten to pick it

back up again. Cam wished they were back there now.

As soon as they had entered the armoury, Dow had removed his thick wet-weather coat. Beneath it, he wore a white vest, which left his lean muscular arms bare and his hard pectorals clearly defined. Cam thought he looked a bit of a ponce – like a young kid, overly proud of his physique. Then he tugged on a pair of heavy steel gauntlets, with knuckles that were edged with nasty-looking barbed spikes. Dow stretched his hands in the gloves, and they glinted silver and wicked. Black leather, sullen and dark like an insect's carapace, swallowed the light between the metal plates. With those vicious things encasing his hands, Dow seemed a lot less like the fifth wheel in a manufactured boy band.

Grímnir removed the expensive leather jacket and t-shirt that Cam had stolen for him and casually dropped them to the floor, causing Cam a moment of irritation. Grímnir picked up a leather jerkin, big enough to fit over his enormous frame. His huge arms were bare and so were the writhing tattoos that covered his body. He kept the jeans but removed his trainers and pulled on a pair of leather boots in their place. Then he spent several minutes looking for a sheath that was roughly the same shape and size as the chainsaw. He found a single-bladed battle-axe with a crescent moon edge and pulled it out of its protective covering.

The chainsaw blade settled into it easily, but the motor was too heavy to be supported. After a bit of messing about, Grímnir rigged a strap and buckle arrangement that supported the chainsaw satisfactorily. It was too cumbersome to go on his back, so he strapped it to his left hip.

Cam didn't bother changing out of his trainers and jeans. He took off his jacket – there was no need for one here – which left his lithe frame covered only by a black t-shirt with a picture of the TARDIS on the front. Feeling exposed, Cam picked up a light but incredibly strong chain mail shirt. After a moment, he strapped some steel thigh guards on as well. Then he picked up a huge double-headed axe and swung it around a couple of times.

Deciding that it was too big, he moved over to another rack and found a straight sword that fit his hand perfectly. The hilt was plain and unadorned as was the wooden sheath. Cam liked its simplicity. He slung it over his back. He then went looking for some gauntlets like the ones Dow had, but he was

disappointed.

As the others got kitted out, Cam wandered through a door at the end of the room. His eyes lit up when he saw what was on the other side. Guns. Cam moved over to a table of lethal-looking weapons and picked one up.

‘Shotguns,’ Dow said from behind him. Cam turned around, cradling the matte black stock.

‘I thought the Courts frowned on these things,’ Cam said as he traced a finger up the thirty-inch barrel.

‘Personally, I do not trust a weapon that can run out of ammunition.’ Dow sniffed. ‘Besides, they are inelegant.’

Cam pumped the empty breach, enjoying the evil snick-snick noise it made. ‘So why are they here?’

‘When The Transmogrification occurred, we needed weapons that could kill from a distance. These are the only ones that proved at all effective. Still, each round had to remove an enemy’s head completely, and we are not good with these ... objects. We tried flamethrowers, but in close confines they proved a liability. The weapons of man are not for us: swords and decent armour are much more effective.’

‘Can I take this?’

Dow shrugged as if he didn’t care. ‘It’s a Remington 870 pump-action shotgun. It is just over fifty inches long and weighs three point six kilograms. As far as I’m concerned, it’s dead weight, but you are the one who will have to carry it.’

‘Where’re the shells?’

Dow showed him where the ammunition was stored and how to load and fire the gun. Cam packed eighty shells into a shoulder bag that reminded him of the one Indiana Jones carried. ‘Silver twelve-gauge,’ Dow stated as Cam counted them out. He also loaded the Remington with eight rounds, giving him eighty-eight rounds in all. Another sheath went across his back over the sword. Cam slotted the firearm home; he felt much more confident.

‘You know a lot about these things, considering you don’t like them,’ he said to Dow when the shotgun was secure.

‘It is a weapon,’ Dow said, as if that explained everything.

Once they were equipped and Cam had stowed a big, sturdy-looking flashlight, spare batteries, and his share of field rations, they followed Dow through a series of rooms where Elves worked and talked quietly. These were not the first signs of life they had seen – when they traversed the various mezzanine levels to get to the armoury, the travellers spied slim men and women working at desks or standing at their doorways. The residents watched them pass with expressionless eyes. Cam stared at the Elf women. He had forgotten how beautiful they were: tall and lithe, with full breasts and perfect features. He found himself gulping a couple of times when he gazed at their ageless faces.

The ground floor, beyond the entrance hall, was the exclusive domain of fighting men and women. Whereas on the mezzanine levels the staid robes of scholars were predominant, down there were the armour and weapons of a guard unit. Cam was not so alienated from The Tower at Dawn that he did not know its recent history. He had been born sixty-five years after the horror of The Transmogrification and remembered the stories he heard as he grew up. Don’t go down below, his elders had warned him; don’t go down below, or the Twisted will get you.

As they had prepared to go in search of the Maiden of Earth and Water, Creachmhaoil told them that the first ten levels were a no man’s land. Cam had expected them to be deserted, and so they proved to be. It took hours of cautious movement to traverse those levels, searching for booby traps lain long ago by the retreating Elves and scouting silently for any stray monsters. Now they stood eleven floors down, in the domain of the horror. Cam looked around nervously and squeezed the shotgun he had acquired.

‘What are these Twisted?’ Grímnir asked from where he stood, staring at the throne.

‘You know, the Twisted ... ORCs!’ Cam blurted.

‘I think that Grímnir was ... absent during The Transmogrification,’ Dow supplied wryly.

‘Oh, right,’ Cam said. Absent, he thought. What the Elf had meant was ‘dead’.

‘The word “Twisted” is a recent colloquialism,’ Dow continued. ‘The official term is ORC. These creatures are the product of the worst kind of necromancy.’

‘Occultly Reanimated Corpse ... ORC, you see?’ Cam asked.

‘Actually, the name derives from Orcus, the Roman god of death. The acronym is a recent affectation.’

‘Potato, tomato, whatever.’

‘They were of the Court, once,’ Dow said quietly. ‘They were my comrades. There have always been zombies – voodoo killing machines – but these are different. Something happened, nobody knows what, and they changed. A bite was enough to kill a loved one and turn them into a feral cannibal within twelve hours. Twelve hours. If somebody was injured – bitten, scratched – twelve hours was the longest they could hope for. Often, they died sooner than that. Then they changed. As soon as they died, they came back. If they died straight away, The Transmogrification took them instantly. I saw friends mauled to death ... and get back up within seconds. But they weren’t my friends anymore. They were empty. Hungry ghosts. Monsters. It was bloody chaos; brother turning on brother, mother on child, husband on wife.’

‘Eventually, the remnants of the Elves and Jöttnar rallied and pushed them back into the lower levels. At the end, only a fraction of the Seelie Court survived. But there are still millions of ORCs left down there. They are very difficult to kill. They don’t feel pain, nor do they fight with any honour. They come on until you cut them down, and then they still come. They are terrible enemies. The most worrying thing is that one bite will render you as vicious and insensible as them. It is a fate worse than death.’

‘What of silver?’

‘It affects them as us, but again, they don’t feel the pain. They just keep coming. They are vulnerable to fire. It will kill them. Brain trauma or decapitation too – it’s the only way to be sure.’

‘What caused this?’ Grímnir asked.

‘Nobody knows. One moment The Tower was at peace, the next, a wave of violence ran through it.’

‘Like a zombie movie,’ Cam added. ‘Just like a zombie movie. I bet you a

hundred quid there was a single point of origin,' he added sagely.

'Nonsense. More likely it was an attack by the Unseelie Court – some kind of magic we had never seen before.' Dow sighed. 'It doesn't matter. It wiped us out. The Twisted live below, we live above. We aren't strong enough to exterminate them, they aren't organised enough to overwhelm us. It's a stalemate.'

'What of the Maiden of Earth and Water?' Grímnir asked.

'She came down here searching for answers. She never came back.'

'She's probably dead,' Cam said.

Grímnir actually laughed. 'She is a god. She is vulnerable, certainly, but I do not think she can be killed.'

'You've never seen an ORC,' Cam said sulkily.

'Neither have you, boy,' Dow snapped. 'No, she isn't dead. But she is missing.'

'We will find her,' Grímnir said with absolute certainty.

'Have you any idea how big this place is?' Cam asked.

'Of course I do.'

'Then how can you expect us to find her? I don't even know what we're doing down here.'

'We will find her,' Grímnir said again. Cam didn't bother to argue.

'We won't if we stay here bickering.' Dow took another look around the hall. The fresh sunlight lit up his face, turning his long white hair a deep vermilion and causing his green eyes to glitter. There, facing the light, he looked truly immortal. Cam envied him his poise. Compared to Dow, Cam felt like a child. 'From here, we leave the circumference and with it, the light. It's time to move into darkness.'

Cam pulled out his flashlight and switched it on. The beam was reassuringly wide and bright. He pointed it at Dow and followed him as he walked across the room to a large wooden door opposite the balcony. Dow pulled it open. Absolute darkness lay behind it. Dow looked back at his companions. 'Ready?' he asked.

'Yes,' Grímnir answered.

'No,' Cam said at the same time.

Samuel

A SMALL PILE OF CORPSES HAD FORMED IN THE LOWER BASEMENT LEVEL WHERE Sam had found his Master. He dumped the final one – Pink Polo Shirt – on top of his dead friends.

Though it was dark, Sam found he could see perfectly. He looked down at the dead bodies, with their bloody bent limbs, their staring eyes and fear twisted faces, and felt a moment of intense satisfaction. He had done this. He had destroyed these men in swift economical violence. He had bested them, and they had died screaming, beneath his hands and teeth.

Looking up, he made eye contact with the lank-haired giant. He looked like a beggar, and Sam felt his blood rising. Why should he call this man his Master? Surely, he was better than this filthy vagabond, with his skinny arms and ridiculous, lanky frame. Sam felt a sneer turn his mouth up at the corners.

Do not test my patience, Samuel Autumn. You were an accident, and you exist only by my sufferance. The words crashed into his head, each syllable a hammer blow that threatened to cave his temples in. Sam groaned and fell to the floor. Strong arms gripped him from behind, and he was dragged to his feet and thrown forwards to tumble to his knees in front of the giant. Sam spun around in a half crouch.

A pair of cold, bulbous eyes met his. Set in a head far too big for the man's wiry body, his eyes dominated a thin face. He wore a cheap, faded blue suit. Sam recognised this man from the alley. Dead Eyes. For the first time in two days, fear stirred in him.

You know my servant, Morgan Leach. You have met before.

'Yes,' Sam muttered. Leach reached out and casually backhanded him across the face. The blow was hard and crippling, and Sam lost his wind for a second.

A roar of anger ripped from Sam's throat as he lurched to his feet and

reached out with both hands to grab Leach. The other man slipped away like mist, and Sam felt himself lumbering forwards in an awkward stumble. Another blow caught him behind his right ear. His body went light, and the world spun away. He realised that he was falling just before he hit the floor. His head bounced on the concrete, and Sam lay there for a moment, dazed and confused.

You must forgive Leach. He is of the old world, of the old traditions. You will find yourself struck repeatedly if you fail to call me 'Master'. Remember this.

'Yes ... Master,' Sam managed to mumble as he dragged himself back to his feet. Leach stood in front of him, staring with those same unblinking eyes, his face as blank as ever. Sam turned back to look at the giant.

'Who are you ... Master?'

I am Cú Roí, the giant said. I am power, and I am death.

'What do you want of me, Master?'

You will serve, or you will die. This world is mine, and I intend to take it. My army will grow, and the old empires and the new will topple before my might. Come, I wish to show you something. Bring some of the food with you. Cú Roí turned and walked away through the derelict basement. Sam picked up the body of Skinhead and followed. They wove between pits that looked as if they had once housed some sort of machinery. He could hear moans coming from a few of them, but most were empty and silent.

Cú Roí stopped in front of one of the pits. *Look in,* he said. Sam bent forwards and stared down. His enhanced sight cut through the darkness. The place might as well have been lit by floodlights, though everything was in black and white.

At the bottom of the pit, he could see an obese woman lying on the floor with her arms resting protectively over her swollen stomach. She appeared to be singing a lullaby.

'What is it?' He heard a whisper of movement behind him. 'Master,' he added hastily, forestalling the blow he was sure Leach had been about to throw at him.

This is a birthing pit.

The words gave Sam clarity. He could see that the woman was not fat, but

incredibly pregnant. She lay at the bottom of the pit looking up blindly. She had obviously heard Sam speaking, because she began to call out.

‘My time is near,’ she said querulously. ‘My child is ready to come into the world. He will be magnificent. Hello? Is anybody there? You will need to look after him. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to him when he is born.’

‘A child ... Master?’

My child. The first of the Barghest.

‘Barghest, Master?’ Sam asked in confusion. He looked up from the pit and back at the giant’s filthy face.

Cú Roí smiled. Sam looked back down into the pit to avoid his glittering, diamond eyes. *Your type is easy to produce, but the blood that spawns you runs fickle and untrue,* Cú Roí said, the words that were not words tumbling around in Sam’s head. *Even Leach can sometimes fail me. The Barghest though ... the Barghest are loyal unto death, and their ferocity and constitution are without peer. With three, I will rule this mire you call a city; with a thousand, I will rule the world. There is something I want you to do for me. Throw the meat in – the child will be hungry.*

Cú Roí turned and walked away. Leach followed him, wordlessly. Sam kicked Skinhead into the pit and heard the corpse crash to the floor. The woman in the hole began to weep pitifully. The sound didn’t reach Sam, who had already run to catch up with the two strange creatures he had found in this stinking basement of death and birthing pits.

‘What do you want me to do, Master?’ Sam asked when he caught up with Cú Roí.

I need women. I need the mothers of the Barghest. I want you to go and procure some for me.

Sam said, ‘Women? You need women to go in those pits? I know just where to start.’ He said it with a grin, but the smirk was wiped from his face when Leach’s open hand crashed into the side of his head.

SARAH

IN THE BIRTHING PIT, SARAH CUDDLED HER STOMACH AND WEPT. SHE HAD HEARD the mind-words of her rapist, and the knowledge that her child would rule the world made her intensely happy.

She wept because she knew her time was near, and the voice of fear that had been nagging in the back of her head was becoming more and more difficult to ignore. Women did not get pregnant and give birth in a matter of hours. She knew there was something wrong, but a part of her didn't care – all that mattered was the baby.

Tears of mixed joy and terror fell to her swollen belly. Pain lurched through her as the child kicked. The tight skin of her abdomen pushed up, and she felt something rip. It felt like a paper cut. The pain brought a moan. Her hands urgently pressed to the wound, and she quickly determined that it was nothing serious – just a thin laceration that had scored the surface of her gut. She wondered how such a large child was going to get out of her.

It kicked again, and this time the skin did split. Agony like nothing else Sarah had ever encountered shuddered through her. At first, she couldn't make a sound. Blood and mucus slopped down to the floor; she heard it splatter in the darkness. Her hand slipped into the massive gash over her belly button, and she felt hot, slimy sinew shuddering within her. Something sharp snapped at her hand, and three of her fingers disappeared.

Finally, she was able to scream. The noise rose, high-pitched and agonised. The other prisoners went quiet, their fear tangible, as Sarah spawned the first Barghest to stalk the Earth in two thousand years.

WITH THE CORPSE OF ITS EVISCERATED MOTHER STILL WARM, THE BARGHEST sniffed the air. It was blind, but its other senses were excellent. The creature's perception was a perfect meld of acute hearing and enveloping smell.

It could scent blood. Saliva washed between its serrated teeth. It had already tasted its mother's flesh, and it turned to rip more from its nest of tissue and gristle. There was another mound of meat nearby – it could smell that, too. First though, it would devour its mother, chewing its way free of the enclosing body.

It could sense the will of its Master, as it had since the moment consciousness bloomed. Its mind was full of needs – the need to please its Master, the need to destroy, the need to cause suffering – but its primary need was to feed and grow strong.

Thrashing around for a better position, the Barghest began to tear at the cooling corpse. There was ecstasy in the copper tang of blood. When it finished with the thing that had birthed it, it would turn to the other meat. Content for the moment, the Barghest fed.

Samuel

SAM DROVE THE STOLEN FERRARI RECKLESSLY, CUTTING THROUGH TRAFFIC, oblivious to the raucous cries of cursing horns that chased him up the road. The smile that was plastered across his face flickered into the occasional snarl. Cú Roí wanted women for the birthing pits, and Sam knew exactly who to give him.

Traffic was light; at the speed he was driving, he was quick to reach the small flat he'd shared with Tabby in a previous life.

The growling Ferrari crawled down the road. Sam stopped the car when he saw the group of thugs that had been making life on the street miserable for so long. Once again, the smile slipped into a snarl, and Sam gunned the engine and sped into the group. He slammed on the brakes just before he hit one of the little hoodlums.

Crystal headlights lit up the face of a young girl – maybe fifteen – who stared through the windscreen at him, wide-eyed and terrified. Then her features

contorted, and she began to yell abuse at him. Calmly, Sam pressed a button, and the sports car's powerful engine died. He got out of the car and stood before the group of youths. He smiled, but inside the darkness was gathering.

'What the fuck are you doing?' shouted the girl. 'Are you fucking blind or something? You could have killed me!'

'You're stood on a road,' Sam said, as if to a dullard. 'What do you expect?'

'You can't just drive through people.'

'I didn't; I stopped. I didn't want to damage the car.'

The girl stormed up to him and pushed him in the chest. Sam looked down at her; she must have seen something in his eyes, because her anger wilted. She took a step backwards. Sam searched the group and eventually found the face he was looking for. 'Have you got anything to add?' he asked the tall youth from the previous night.

The tall youth smiled and walked over. 'Nice car,' he said with a smirk.

'Well, someone wrote "fucking cunt" on my other one, so I thought I'd upgrade. What are you driving these days?'

'Funny.' It was a flat-faced statement. 'What do you want?'

'Congratulations, you remained half-civil for almost five seconds – that must be a personal best for you.'

'What do you want, you prick? You called the cops on us again?' The boy moved forwards until he was only a few inches from Sam. He jerked his head forwards aggressively, as if to butt the older man. Sam didn't flinch. The boy didn't back away and they stood nose to nose, so close that Sam could smell his beer-laced body odour. The night around them was still, holding its breath, watching.

'No, the police are powerless.'

'So, what the fuck do you want?' the boy shouted in Sam's face.

Sam moved fast. He took a step back and slapped the boy gently on the cheek. The noise punched a hole in the quiet of the night. The boy stared at Sam incredulously. 'You can't do that,' he gasped. It was almost a whine.

'Really?' Sam slapped him again, harder this time. The force of the blow sent the youth to his knees. 'I don't see why not.'

There was a whisper of motion to his right. Sam turned his body and raised his hand smoothly. A thrown beer can slapped into his waiting palm. He crushed it and threw it back into the crowd in one smooth, economical movement. The projectile hit the boy who had thrown it square in the forehead, and he dropped to the ground, clutching a small gash.

Sam's gaze swept the group and they shied from it. He looked down at the kneeling boy. 'I have decided that I am no longer bound by your rules.' He leant down and grabbed the tall youth by his hair. Then he dragged him to his feet.

'Get off me, you can't do this. I'm a kid.'

'You aren't children, you're animals. I have come to appreciate the more bestial side of human nature in the last twenty-four hours or so, and like recognises like.' The boy raised both hands to Sam's wrist and tried to pull his hair free. Sam punched him on the nose. Blood shot out and spilled to the tarmac. 'I have come to realise that it is much easier to kill, than to live in fear. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'Get off me!' the boy screamed. A light snapped on in Mrs. Nicholls's house, and Sam saw the old woman watching from her window. He waved cheerfully. She stared at him for a moment and then disappeared.

'You have caused misery around here for months now, secure that there are no repercussions. No punishment. Well, now there is punishment. It's me.' Sam slapped the boy another couple of times for good measure. Mrs. Nicholls's front door opened, and the old lady came walking across the street towards them.

'Let that child go,' she commanded. 'I've called the police. Let him go right this minute!'

Sam looked at her, perplexed. 'Why?'

'He's only a child. Let him go.'

Sam released the boy, who fell back into his friends with a whimper. 'These cretins have tormented you for months. They deserve to be punished.'

'Not by you. Not like this.'

'Fine,' Sam said, losing interest. 'Have you seen my wife?'

Mrs. Nicholls stopped a few feet from him and put her hands on her hips. 'No. She went off in a taxi earlier today, and I've not seen her since. She had a

suitcase with her. I don't blame her, from what I've just seen. The police were here looking for you earlier, too.' Her tone was accusatory.

'I'm trying to protect you ...'

'No, young man,' Mrs. Nicholls interrupted, 'you are taking pleasure in bullying a child.'

'Whatever.' Sam turned and walked back towards the Ferrari. As he was getting in, the tall youth shouted after him. Sam turned back to the crowd, genuine fury rising in him. 'What did you say?'

'You heard me,' the boy shouted. 'I'm going to burn your fucking house down. I'm going to ...' he didn't get any further. Sam leapt at him. There was maybe ten feet between them, but Sam covered the distance in one powerful bound. He caught the boy by the throat and wrenched him up against a nearby hedge, pinning him deep within the sharp twigs and bristly leaves. A panicked spider crawled out over the boy's shoulder and scuttled across his chest. The boy made a gagging noise.

'If I ever see you again, I'll rip your lungs out and post them to your parents.' Sam tightened his grip for emphasis. 'I don't care how you think the world works; in me, you have met death. Any damage to my property, and I'll come for you.' He pulled the boy out of the bushes and threw him to the ground.

Crouching over him, Sam dug into the boy's pockets and came out with a canvas wallet. He dug out the boy's student ID and held it up in front of his face. 'Now I know your name and where you go to school, Thomas Michael Moore. Any trouble at all, and you'll be seeing me.'

Sam stood and surveyed the terrified group. 'That goes for all of you.' He stared at them for a few moments and then climbed back into the Ferrari. He believed Mrs. Nicholls – somehow the house had felt empty when he had looked at it. Where would Tabby go? There was only one place. He started the engine.

Driving away slowly, he waved at the stunned group that stood outside the place he used to live.

Camhlaidh

IT WAS DARK WITHIN THE TOWER. AWAY FROM THE DAWN SUN THAT LIT THE outer ring of rooms, the narrow corridors were close and eerie. Cam clutched his shotgun to his chest. It was loaded, and the safety was off. The noise of the metal barrel rubbing against his chain mail shirt was a subtle whisper that filled his ears.

Doors had rotted off their hinges. Every time they passed one, Cam couldn't help but stare in, half-expecting a wave of monsters to come pouring out and eat his brains. Neither Grímnir nor Dow seemed concerned by the rooms – Cam wished he knew what they knew.

Dow walked at the front carrying Cam's flashlight. Point, Cam ruminated. Too many Vietnam movies, he thought straight afterwards. Grímnir strode along behind Dow with his hand resting gently on his chainsaw. Cam brought up the rear. He was not happy about that. He kept turning his head worriedly, to see if anything was creeping up behind him. Not that he could tell – Dow kept the flashlight pointing forwards.

They had managed to descend another seven levels, putting them on minus eighteen. So far, they had seen no signs of life or death. Cam half wished something would happen – the tension was unbearable. Ahead, Dow turned a corner and for a second the light vanished. Cam increased his pace.

Following, he found himself stood in another large chamber. Dow did a quick reconnaissance with the flashlight. Its wide beam cut the darkness. Cam could see that the room was roughly sixty-five feet square, with a big double door at the opposite end. It was a kitchen. A few ancient-looking cauldrons were scattered around. They looked dirty and pitted. Fireplaces were built into the walls. Thick spits lay abandoned in their grates. Long stone counters and tables criss-crossed the room. There was a well in the centre of the space. Huge granite troughs and sinks were stationed next to it. On the lip of the well was a rust-chewed metal bucket. Grímnir walked over to it.

‘Oy, Peregrin Took,’ Cam hissed at Grímnir. ‘Don’t touch that bucket!’

Grímnir turned around. ‘Why not? It must service a reservoir somewhere in the levels below us. And who is this Peregrin Took?’

‘Never mind,’ Cam said. ‘Just don’t touch that bloody bucket.’ Grímnir shrugged and walked away from it. He sat on one of the stone slabs.

‘He’s a bit big to be a Hobbit, don’t you think?’ Dow asked from directly behind him. Cam jumped at the sudden noise in his ear.

‘Jesus,’ he said, clutching the shotgun closer to his chest. ‘You scared me.’

Dow almost laughed. ‘You’re jumpy.’

‘Jumpy?’ Cam whispered furiously. ‘I’m stuck down here with a chainsaw-wielding lunatic on some sort of holy quest, and there’s probably a small army of zombie ... things ... sat in the shadows, trying to decide whether my brain would taste better pan-fried or fricasseed; I can practically hear them licking their lips. And we’re in a kitchen. Of course I’m jumpy.’

‘You worry too much.’

‘I’d just prefer it if he doesn’t go knocking that bucket down that well. We don’t want any noise.’

‘No argument there.’

Cam went and sat near Grímnir. Dow followed. ‘The Tower used to be lit with magic,’ Grímnir said reflectively. ‘Every corner, every alcove lit brightly so that there was no darkness.’

‘The Svartálfar?’

‘Yes – it was a defence against the dark Elves. But it was also a celebration of light. The Tower at Dawn used to be a place of hope and whimsy. It saddens me to see it like this – abandoned to the shadows.’

Cam fidgeted, uncomfortable with the big man’s melancholy. ‘How are we going to find the Maiden of Earth and Water?’ Cam asked to change the subject. ‘We can’t just wander around here forever.’

‘The Tattooist,’ Grímnir said. ‘He will know.’

‘Who?’ Cam asked. Dow looked just as confused.

‘The Tattooist. He lives on the twenty-fifth floor. He will know.’

‘I’ve never heard of him,’ Dow said.

‘He values his privacy. Do not worry, my friends. The Tattooist will know where to look.’ Cam and Dow exchanged meaningful glances. Or at least Cam looked at Dow with a raised eyebrow, and the Elf stared back at him impassively.

‘Look, Grímnir, have you considered the possibility that this Tattooist guy might be ... well ... dead?’ Cam asked. Grímnir laughed and Cam bridled. ‘Dow’s never heard of him, it’s been two thousand years since you were down here, and a zombie apocalypse kicked off in his backyard. You’ve got to admit that the odds are against him.’

‘He will be there.’

‘This is useless, Grímnir,’ Cam said. ‘We’re wasting time. The magic you harbour could give us fresh hope ...’

‘No,’ Grímnir said. ‘I will not abandon my quest.’

Cam looked at Dow helplessly. This time, the Elf did seem to reciprocate his feeling. ‘Grímnir, you have a duty to your people,’ Dow began.

‘My people? I did not see any of my people in The Tower, Dow Sé Mochaomhog. What do I owe my people?’

‘The Jötnar have suffered the most with the dying of the magic. They have gone into retreat in the forests atop The Tower. Your people need you more than any ...’

‘My people understand the importance of my quest. They understand the sacrifice I have made. They understand that it is immutable. That is why they did not seek me, and why I did not seek them. You Elves have always been too hasty, too changeable. I will finish what I have started.’

‘Finish what?’ Cam demanded. ‘This is lunacy. We’re chatting in the bowels of a zombie-infested labyrinth, and you’re holding to some meaningless tradition!’

‘If Cú Roí is allowed to run free, then these ORCs you are so worried about will seem as children. The plague he will unleash will mean the end of the world.’

‘Don’t you understand? Our world is already ending! The magic’s dying! Without the juice in your body art, it’s going to die all that much sooner. We

need you!’

‘Is that why you accompanied me, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha?’ Grímnir roared. ‘To divert me from my task? To fulfil your own selfish desires?’

‘Of course it is, you dildo,’ Cam screamed back. ‘I don’t want to die!’

‘Well, you’ve got a very intelligent way of preventing it,’ Dow snapped sarcastically.

‘What?’

‘Stop shouting. Listen.’ Cam listened. Through the walls and darkness, the sound of a thousand howling voices could be heard. ‘The Twisted,’ Dow said grimly. ‘They know we’re here now. Your noise has undone us.’

‘Fucking Peregrin Took,’ Cam groaned to himself in disgust. Grímnir started his chainsaw, and its cutting snarl roared through the dark room. Dow shrugged his shoulders a couple of times to limber up his arms, and he flexed the fingers of his gauntlets. ‘What now?’ Cam asked.

‘Now, we run,’ Dow said grimly. He turned and stalked towards the double doors at the end of the room.

MARK

MARK DROVE WITHOUT A DESTINATION. HIS PHONE RANG. WHEN HE ANSWERED it, Sergei’s voice slid from the car’s speakers.

‘We’ve had a hit,’ Sergei said. ‘Autumn used his credit card. I’m uploading it to your satnav now.’

Mark watched as the coordinates pinged up, and a map was traced on the screen, set into the custom console to his left. ‘That’s not far. I’m on my way. Stay on the line.’

The Corvette roared as he put his foot down.

Samuel

SAM WALKED TOWARDS THE FERRARI CARRYING A PLASTIC SHOPPING BAG. HE had stopped at a supermarket. It was one of those huge warehouses that sold anything anybody could imagine or desire. He had bought cable ties and duct tape.

He slung the bag onto the passenger seat and then climbed into the car and started the engine. On the way out of the supermarket's car park, he saw a blue Corvette with its hazard lights on, parked up in the junction to his right. A wiry-looking man with an olive complexion sat in the driver's seat. He appeared to be engrossed in a road map.

'Stupid place to stop,' Sam said to himself as he turned towards Tabby's parents' house. He thought about what he would do there with anticipation. Sam didn't notice when the Corvette pulled out a couple of cars back and began to follow him.

ROWAN

ONCE AGAIN, IT WAS A NOISE FROM DOWNSTAIRS THAT WOKE ROWAN. THIS TIME, he didn't snap to consciousness. This time, his awakening was foggy and slow, and accompanied by a dry-mouthed moan. He had drunk his eight beers while Tabby drowned her sorrows with a bottle of wine, and he was slightly hungover.

They had talked for hours. He'd told her about work, about his friends, his colleagues, and his supervisor. He told her about his boxing and his next posting. He told her that he had taken up abseiling, and she laughed at him and called

him an adrenaline junkie. He tried to explain how safe it was, but she just kept on teasing him.

She told him about Sam, and he tried to change the subject by reminiscing about their parents. It didn't help.

By the end, Tabby was insensible, swinging between false cheer and despairing sobs from moment to moment. She passed out with the bottle empty in her hand, having given up on her glass halfway through it. Gently, Rowan had picked her up and put her to bed still dressed. He had covered her and then gone to his own room and climbed between the sheets. Sleep had come quickly.

A glance at his bedside clock showed Rowan that it was almost three in the morning. He groaned again and fell back to his pillow. The sound came again, and he sat up and rubbed his eyes. Alert now, Rowan pulled his boxer shorts back on and again reached for the golf club.

'It's probably just Tabby throwing up,' he said to himself under his breath, though he didn't believe it. After his first month in Afghanistan, he had been wary of danger. After the second, he had become paranoid. By the third, he had developed a sixth sense, and it was tingling now. His Spidey Sense in action: something was wrong.

Quietly slipping from his room, Rowan made his way to the top of the stairs, gliding forwards on bare feet. No lights were on. To his left, he could see that Tabby's bedroom door was open. He had definitely left it shut.

Next to it, the bathroom door was also open. The curtains were drawn in both rooms, making them too dark to see into. He glanced downstairs. Nothing. It was quiet; Rowan wondered if he was imagining things.

With the alcoholic fog slowly slipping from his mind, he realised he was exposed out on the landing. Best to pretend this was a live operation, even if he was being paranoid. In that case, he needed to secure the house room by room. He stepped back into his bedroom and turned on the light. Then he switched on the landing light.

If there were intruders, they knew he was awake. Hopefully they'd just slip away. Rowan decided to give them a couple of minutes. While he did that, he glanced into the bathroom and Tabby's room, now lit by the landing. He could

see along the bathroom's narrow length to the toilet. Nobody was in there unless they stood in the bath. Tabby lay in bed, on one side, with her back to him. Her shoulders moved up and down as she breathed. Rowan smiled to himself. She was fast asleep.

Stupid, he thought. He was scaring himself. Still, better safe than sorry. He moved downstairs and turned on the lights. Systematically, he went from room to room, finding nothing. He entered the kitchen last, almost lackadaisical as he strode through the door, the golf club swinging casually by his side.

Alarm bells went off in his mind when he saw the back door barely on its hinges. The door jamb had been smashed out in long splinters where the lock had been forced through it. A quick series of popping noises came from somewhere. As he turned back towards the hall, Rowan heard a muffled cry.

'Tabby,' he shouted. 'Tabby, don't worry, I'm coming!' Rowan stormed up the stairs holding the golf club in front of him like a baseball bat. The lights were all off again, and the darkness smothered him. His breath hissed out in short, panicked bursts. He flicked a switch, but nothing happened. Taking a step forwards, he muttered a curse as his bare foot came down on broken glass. Rowan skipped back and went very still.

The intruder was up here somewhere. Whoever it was must have been hiding in Tabby's room. He had probably removed the upstairs light bulbs and stamped on them; that would have been the popping noises Rowan heard. He had left the shards as a trap at the top of the stairs.

Rowan was lucky: he hadn't put his weight down, and the sting from the minor laceration was already fading. His mind whirled. Pray he's stupid, Rowan thought to himself.

'Who's there? If you don't get out now, I'm going to fuck you right up.' There was no answer. The guy wasn't stupid. Rowan peered into Tabby's bedroom; it was pitch black. Suddenly the house felt cold and his nipples tightened. He felt vulnerable, stood there in the darkness wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.

For a second he hesitated, then he squared his shoulders, gripped the golf club a little firmer, and moved stealthily towards the darkened bedroom. His

sister was his priority. He knew about fighting in the dark; he was trained for it. The intruder was not giving himself away, and Rowan wasn't going to give him the advantage.

Crossing the threshold was hard. Rowan did it quickly, shoulder barging the door, hopefully crushing anybody hiding behind it. Simultaneously, he swung the golf club in a wide arc at head height, hitting nothing, and pushed his back against the wall to the left of the door.

For a second he stood and listened. Whistling, shallow breath came from the bed. Tabby. Relief forced a gasp from him when he realised that she was still alive. There was nothing else – no movement, no sound. Rowan used the club to test his surroundings, waving it around like a blind man.

Nothing. Rowan took a step to the bed and reached down to touch Tabby. Her scream was muffled. Feeling around, Rowan found her mouth was covered with tape. 'Tabby, it's okay, it's me,' he whispered. She stopped moving, and Rowan pulled the tape off.

'Rowan?' she whispered.

'Yes. What happened?'

'I don't know – there was a man.'

'Where is he?'

'You've got to get us out of here. His eyes ... there's something wrong with his eyes.'

'Don't worry, I'll protect you.'

A new voice came from the corner of the room. 'No, you won't.'

'Sam?' Tabby asked into the darkness.

'Shut up, whore,' Sam said pleasantly.

'Sam, please ...'

'I said shut up!' Sam screamed. It was a furious sound, insane and aggressive. Tabby went quiet.

'What do you want, Sam?' Rowan asked.

'Rowan,' Sam said, his voice calm and even once more. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'I'm on leave.' Rowan's hands searched Tabby as he spoke. She was

quivering, her breathing quick and shallow. He found the plastic ties that were wrapped around her wrists. Similar ones bound her legs.

‘You won’t get them off easily,’ Sam said conversationally.

Rowan froze. How could Sam see what he was doing in the dark? ‘Why don’t you come out where I can see you?’

‘Why should I?’

Rowan stared into the gloom. Something was there in the deepest shadows – two yellow specks floating eerily in nothingness. ‘What do you want, Sam?’

‘The bitch. It’s nothing personal ... well, actually, that’s a lie.’

‘Watch your mouth,’ Rowan snapped, his temper finally fraying.

Sam chuckled. ‘I’m sorry, I did not mean to offend your fraternal sensibilities. However, I do need Tabby, and you can’t stop me taking her.’

It was Rowan’s turn to laugh. ‘Come on Sam – I can take you one-handed.’

‘No, Rowan, you really can’t.’ Sam stepped out of the shadows and Rowan saw that his eyes were yellow and feral, and glowing like a wolf’s.

‘My God, Sam, what happened to you?’

‘I was deified. Now, step out of the way. I like you, Rowan, I don’t want to hurt you.’

‘To get at Tabby you’ll have to go over my dead body.’

‘So be it.’ The two yellow fireflies sped towards Rowan at an alarming pace. He swung the golf club and it cannoned into the side of Sam’s head. Rowan felt the shaft shiver and break beneath the blow. Graphite piece of shit, he thought as the impact forced him to drop what was left of the shaft.

Then Sam tore into him, and they went tumbling from the room and onto the landing. Rowan twisted and managed to get Sam beneath him. Before he could do anything, Sam forced a leg between them, and they rolled to Rowan’s left. Sam grunted as the broken glass of the light bulbs scored his shoulder, and then the world fell away. A series of jarring blows shook his teeth and rattled his ribs as they tumbled haphazardly down the stairs.

Sam was laughing when they hit the bottom. Rowan groaned and extricated himself. He pulled himself to his feet. Sam rose and faced him. Rowan felt the blood drain from his face. On the surface, Sam was the same. His face was the

same, his body was the same, even his hair was the same. But his clothes were covered in blood - long spatters that could only have come from slashing somebody.

The other differences were unsettling. His eyes flashed yellow with pinpoint black pupils, his smile was too wide, and the teeth beneath it were long and pointed. The worst thing though – the most alien thing – was the expression on his face. It was full of madness and hate, and in it, Rowan could see nothing of the man he had come to know and respect.

‘Sam ... What’s happened to you? You look like a fucking vampire!’

‘Power, Rowan. But it has its price. I need your sister.’

‘You can’t have her.’ Rowan had lost the golf club, but he raised his hands into a loose boxer’s pose and waited. His sister was trussed and helpless upstairs, and he would fight this creature with Sam’s face.

‘That’s a pity. I’ll kill you quick, and I won’t eat you. See how much I respect you?’

Rowan lunged forwards and snapped a quick distracting left at Sam’s face. Immediately he swung his right leg around and down in a chopping motion, so that his shin drove into the meaty part of Sam’s leg, just above the knee. Both blows landed. Blood gushed from Sam’s broken nose. Rowan cursed and staggered backwards at the sudden pain in his leg. Sam hadn’t even been moved by the kick.

Sam laughed and wiped his nose. The blood had already stopped and there was no bruising or swelling. It should be broken, Rowan thought to himself as he backed into the kitchen uncertainly.

‘My turn,’ Sam said.

‘No, Autumn,’ a powerful voice said from behind Rowan. ‘It’s mine.’

‘Who are you?’ Sam asked politely. Rowan turned around. A tall, wiry man with an olive complexion and black eyes stood haughtily in Rowan’s kitchen. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, with short black hair and a long nose. His hands were behind his back.

‘Yeah, who the fuck are you?’ Rowan demanded.

The tall man took a step forwards and pushed Rowan to one side. ‘My name

is Mark. I'm here for you, Autumn. I am a hunter of your kind.'

'I doubt it,' Sam sneered. 'I doubt you've ever seen anything like me before.' He sprung towards Mark. The olive-skinned man spun gracefully to one side, and Rowan saw something long and black in his hands. As Sam went past, the black thing separated, and a silver blur flashed up and out. Rowan saw that it was a sword.

The blade hissed down, slicing the air with a high-pitched keening noise that ripped through the room. The sword cut smoothly through Sam's left shoulder. His collarbone snapped and gore splashed everywhere. The steel exited Sam's chest, and a mist of blood came with it, hanging in the room for a moment.

Sam staggered. He turned to face his attacker, but Mark was already moving. He stepped by Sam and the razor edge ran almost delicately over his stomach. Entrails spilled to the kitchen floor, and Sam bellowed in rage more than pain.

He should have lost consciousness by now, Rowan thought. He must be on PCP or something. An awful stench of shit and death filled the room, and Rowan gagged. Sam didn't seem to notice – he was lost in a blinding haze of fury. The injured man's movements were jerky, and his face was scrunched up in demented rage. Mark's movements, in stark contrast to Sam's awkwardness, were cold and elegant and completely controlled.

It was like a dance. After the disembowelling cut, Mark whipped the blade down into the back of Sam's legs and hamstringed him. The noise the sword made as it whipped through the air was a howl: the harbinger of Sam's death. Rowan's brother-in-law collapsed to his knees with a growl. With eyes full of hatred, he raised his hands out to Mark as if to try and grab him.

The sword flashed again, its high-pitched song dreadful, and fingers scattered across the floor like fallen petals. Where they landed, they withered away in seconds, leaving nothing behind but a fine dust. Dismayed, Rowan turned to look for Sam's blood and entrails; the viscera that had splattered to the floor had collapsed into smears of vermilion powder.

'What the hell is going on!' he demanded. Mark ignored him. He raised the black sword above his head and brought it down. Its banshee scream chilled Rowan's blood. Mark decapitated Sam with one last blow, and Sam's head

tumbled beneath the kitchen table.

After a pause, Sam's kneeling body stiffened. His fingerless hand went grey as gangrenous cysts swept through his veins. Within seconds, Sam's body turned to rose coloured ash and crumbled to the floor. To Rowan, it looked as if a small sand dune was wearing Sam's clothes. 'What the hell is going on?' he shouted again.

Mark turned to face Rowan with a puzzled expression on his face. 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'It shouldn't have done that.'

'No shit, Sherlock! I've never seen anybody crumble into dust outside of cheesy vampire movies! Who the hell are you anyway? Abraham Van fucking Helsing?'

Mark ignored him. He walked over to the pile of dust that had been Sam's body and stared at it in silence for a moment. 'Where's his head?' Mark asked.

'How should I know – where does dust go for a good time these days?' Rowan snapped.

'It went under the table – it's not there now.'

'It turned to dust,' Rowan said.

'There isn't any dust under there. It should be dead. Decapitation, fire, and silver. That's what should kill them. This one is different,' Mark said grimly. A strange scraping noise came from the hallway. As one, they turned to face the kitchen door. Wordlessly, they both stepped out.

'Jesus Christ,' Rowan whispered in disgust. On the floor near the stairs, Sam's head was slowly being dragged along by a writhing mound of tentacles that had erupted from his severed neck. They were red and thick, and covered with pulsing veins and a viscous slime.

The head turned around to face them, and staring yellow eyes bored into Rowan's. The mouth was working furiously as if it were trying to say something to them, but there was no voice because there was no voice box. As they watched, the tendrils that crawled from Sam's neck, like a cluster of blind worms, got longer and began to bond together. After a moment, Sam's neck was a little more defined, and a whisper could be heard from his throat.

'I'll fucking kill you both, and that slut upstairs,' he hissed. The tentacles

were much longer now. They were beginning to wrap around each other and merge together.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Rowan said again.

‘It is regenerating,’ Mark said calmly. ‘I do not have the means to kill it here – we have to leave.’ He grabbed Rowan by the arm and began to pull him towards the front door, away from the abomination on the floor. Shoulders were evident, and the obscene mound of sticky red flesh was rapidly forming a torso. Rowan allowed himself to be pulled a few feet, his eyes glued to the hellish sight at the base of his stairs.

Shaking himself free of his shock, he shrugged Mark’s hand away. ‘We have to get my sister – she’s upstairs.’

‘There isn’t time.’

‘Then go. I’m not leaving her behind.’ Rowan turned and ran back towards the stairs. He hurdled the pulpy mass that was quickly becoming his brother-in-law. A tentacle slapped against his lower leg, and he realised it was trying to grab him. Rowan cried out involuntarily but managed to avoid getting snared. He charged up to Tabby without looking back.

Tabby was where he had left her, trussed up on the bed. ‘What’s going on? Who’s there?’ she asked as he stumbled into her room. Her voice was steady and strong, and Rowan loved her for her calm.

‘We’re getting out of here. Now.’ He searched for something to cut the cable ties on her hands and remembered that a pair of scissors were kept in a mug of pencils and pens on a small desk beneath the window. There was a lamp on it too. He fumbled around until he found the switch and turned it on, then he snatched up the scissors and cut the thin plastic. Tabby sat up, rubbing her wrists.

‘What’s going on? I heard banging. Shouting.’

‘We need to get out of here now.’ He didn’t wait for a response. Clutching the scissors like a knife, he moved cautiously to the door and edged out. The landing was clear. He could see the stairs, but not down them. His own room was dark and so was the bathroom. Sam could be anywhere.

Cautiously, he moved onto the landing for a better look down to the ground floor. He motioned for Tabby to stay where she was. She nodded in

understanding. Rowan peered between the rails of the banister. There was nothing but a crust of gritty red dust at the bottom of the stairs. Rowan had to assume that the monster was mobile again. He took a step back uncertainly and put his back against a wall. His mind worked furiously. He cursed himself for not paying better attention to the landing while he was freeing Tabby.

What to do? He could try to get them out of Tabby's window but jumping would risk a twisted ankle or worse. He could just run, but he suspected Sam was waiting for something like that. Phone the police? And tell them what? Besides, this would all be over by the time they got here. Even if they did make it in time, what were batons and CS Spray going to do to someone who could survive being decapitated?

Think! he screamed at himself silently. Clutching the scissors tighter, he quickly moved the bigger pieces of broken bulb from the top of the stairs. Then he backed into Tabby's bedroom.

'What's going on,' she whispered.

'He's playing with us,' Rowan said grimly.

'What do you mean?'

'He's enjoying this. He's torturing us.'

'What's the matter? You're not afraid of Sam.'

'I am now,' he muttered. 'He's in here somewhere, Tabby, and he's very dangerous. There's no other way – we're going to have to run for it. I want you to go first, straight out and down the stairs. Go through to the back rather than messing with the front door. Straight out and run as fast as you can. Get onto the street and start screaming. I want you to raise bloody murder on the street – I want everybody looking at you, okay?'

'Why the back?'

'It's already off its hinges.'

'What about you?'

'I'll be right behind you,' he said reassuringly. He didn't feel it. He doubted he would be able to buy her much time with nothing but a pair of scissors. 'Are you ready?' She nodded. 'Then let's go.'

They ran together. It was a slow-motion nightmare for Rowan. On the

landing, his senses were heightened as he concentrated on identifying an attack from one of the dark rooms before it happened. Nothing.

They hurried down the stairs, and for a heart-stopping moment, he thought Tabby was going to fall. She kept her balance, and relief flooded through him. It was short lived. He had been sure that Sam was in one of the upstairs rooms, but he was wrong. That meant he was ahead of them, and Tabby was in front.

Before he could shout a warning, she darted into the kitchen. Rowan chased her desperately, fully expecting to see Sam gripping her triumphantly when he turned the corner. He wasn't there, and Tabby was already at the door. Hope dared to raise its head.

Tabby was out the door and running for the side gate. They ran around the house and into the front garden. The night was dark, but the moon shone, giving the world a disjointed, pale glow. Rowan's breath was heavy and loud in the night. His heart was hammering. Blood thundered in his ears. The gate shrieked as it opened, and Tabby ran into the centre of the road. Rowan began to believe that they were going to make it.

There was a flash of lights, a searing pain in the back of his skull, and then, nothing.

MARK

MARK SAT IN HIS CAR, KNOWING HE SHOULD DRIVE AWAY BUT HESITATING. Shame burned in him for leaving the young man and his sister to the mercy of that animal. He kept telling himself that it was not his fight, that he needed to retreat and regroup. The words felt hollow.

Just as he reached around to put his sword behind his seat, the grating noise of an uncoiled gate made him look back at the house. He was surprised to see a woman and the young man running from the house. For a moment, he felt a surge of hope. Then he saw a naked figure, with yellow eyes glaring bright and

feral in the moonlight, rise from the bushes and crash a fist against the back of the young man's head. He collapsed to the ground in a boneless way.

Autumn leapt over the gate and caught the woman by the throat and mouth, stifling any cries. He dragged her towards the black Ferrari, parked a little up the street from the house. Mark stared at the girl in the moonlight for a second.

'Shit,' he said to himself. He pounded the steering wheel in sudden, unadulterated rage. 'Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,' he hissed as his palms struck the wheel. He did not shout – he had too much control for that. He wanted to, though.

The Ferrari shot off, and the Corvette followed.

@amhlaidh

THEY MADE IT THROUGH TWO ROOMS BEFORE THE ORCs FOUND THEM. CAM WAS the first to see them. The distorted, bent creatures came pouring out of a side door, a wave of rotting faces and claw-like hands. A smell of filth and putrefying flesh preceded them. Dow ran with the flashlight, and its jumping, weaving light was a confused strobe. It's like the trailers for that new movie he wanted to see, Cam thought inanely. What was it called? *The Blair Witch Project* or something. This was plain unnerving chaos. Jesus, he was scared!

Grímnir roared a battle cry and leapt towards them. His chainsaw matched his shout, and the first of the creatures squealed as the toothed blade slammed through its arm and chest. Thick, black blood oozed from its rent torso. It went down and the other creatures trampled it. Then the fight was joined.

It was a blurred, confused experience for Cam. Dow and Grímnir were up ahead in the narrow corridor with their backs to him. He could hear the chainsaw; he could see Dow's gauntlets whipping around him in flat brutal sweeps, glittering in the light from the flashlight, which he had dropped to the

floor. Cam aimed the shotgun, trying to get a target, but the angle of the flashlight's beam was treacherous, and the heaving mass of bodies were so close together that he couldn't be certain if he was aiming at friend or foe.

He knew he should draw his sword and rush to his comrades' aid, but fear held him petrified. Grímnir fought with berserk frenzy, his chainsaw swinging left and right in tight arcs that chopped the Twisted away, ruthlessly tearing ravaged heads from stick thin necks. For all the wildness of his blows, Cam saw that the chainsaw never once threatened Dow, who stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

Dow, by contrast, fought in silence. His gauntlets crushed skulls with cold efficiency. Yet they were barely keeping the horde of creatures at bay, despite their prowess. Blood splashed across their chests and arms.

It was inevitable, really. One of the monsters managed to slip past the screeching chainsaw. Dead, black eyes found Cam. He stood transfixed under that soulless glare. Tightening his grip, he clutched his shotgun like a security blanket. He automatically cast a Glamour, but the creature didn't take its eyes from him.

The ORC was tall, towering above Cam, but its body was emaciated. Long, straggly hair fell from a balding pate in matted clumps. One pointed ear gave testimony to its previous incarnation as an Elf. The other was gone, bitten or torn off in some old battle. The flesh of its face was rotting away; the remainder was grey and soggy, like skin left in a bath too long. The nose, top lip, and most of the bottom were missing. Foetid rips in its cheeks gave the thing a wide, Joker-like smile that didn't reach its blank shark eyes. Big sharp teeth showed through the ruin of its face.

It was naked. The glory of its elfin physique had rotted into a hunched, bony carcass with gaping wounds in its stomach. Bulges of grey intestine hung out like huge obscene maggots. It had only two fingers on its right hand – Cam saw with sick horror that the nails at the end were thick and chisel-like. The other hand had been torn away completely; only a raw and ragged stump remained.

It tilted its head to one side and hissed. Cam gulped as he stood and stared in numb shock. It was like time had slowed down; the thing came at him as though

through thick liquid. Details leapt out. Most of its left pectoral was gone, and the ribs beneath were stained and pitted. Its penis and one testicle had rotted off, and what remained was swollen to five or six times its original size. He watched every surging step it took on its thin legs, every snarling grinding of teeth, every spasmodic clench of its remaining fingers. Weeping sores covered its body where there was flesh left to hold them. It made a noise like a wounded cat as it charged towards him.

At the very last moment, his survival instincts took over. He levelled the shotgun at the ORC's mangled face. The muzzle practically touched it as its finger slashed around to find Cam's throat. He closed his eyes tight and pulled the trigger. Its head disappeared in a cloud of liquefied skull and brain, and the force of the explosion threw its twitching carcass back. The noise was deafening in the close confines of the narrow hallway, and dazed, Cam staggered in a half circle.

Tar-like blood and bits of teeth and skull covered his face and hair, but he barely noticed. His ears were ringing, and all sense of direction had gone. He found a wall and slumped against it, one hand holding the shotgun, the other clutching at his ear. Sight came back first. Dow and Grímnir stood alone with numb expressions on their faces. There was no noise. Cam wondered why everybody had gone so quiet. Then he saw the blade of the chainsaw still going full throttle and realised he was deaf.

Dow mouthed something at him. 'What?' Cam shouted back. Dow looked confused. Cam saw him mouth something else in the vague electric light; it looked like he said 'what,' too. There was confusion while the three of them exchanged deaf, useless 'whats'. A few more seconds passed, and sounds began to return. 'I can hear again,' Cam said.

'Me too,' Grímnir replied.

'The noise scared them off, but they'll be back,' Dow said. 'How far to this tattooist of yours, Grímnir?'

'Not far.'

'You lead, I'll bring up the rear. Camhlaidh, take the flashlight and stay between us.'

‘No problem,’ Cam said as he surveyed the wreckage in the narrow corridor. The ORC he had killed was lying still on the floor. Its head was missing. Where Dow and Grímnir had stood, there was nothing but body parts and headless corpses. Some of them were still moving. Cam couldn’t count how many they had killed.

‘Is anybody bitten?’ Dow snapped. Cam was covered in the creature’s stinking gore, but other than that, he was fine. Dow and Grímnir were similarly unwounded. ‘You didn’t swallow anything? Didn’t get any in your eyes?’ Cam shook his head in the negative. ‘Good. Then let’s go.’ Cam swept up the flashlight as he went past it.

They were quickly away from the scene of the small battle. A few moments later, the howling started again.

Samuel

TOSSING HIS GAGGED AND CABLE-TIED WIFE TO THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF CÚ ROÍ gave Sam immense pleasure. He looked up at the tall creature to which he found himself beholden. Tabby was sobbing gently through her gag, and once again something deep inside Sam’s skull stirred – something of doubt and fear and pity. He shrugged it away angrily.

As ever, Morgan Leach stood at his Master’s side, ridiculous in his filthy blue suit. Leach’s cold eyes never left Sam, and he felt his anger rising at the obvious challenge. He smiled thinly at his rival and promised himself that one day he would cave the sallow man’s head in.

What have you brought me?

‘It is my wife, Master.’

Your wife?

Cú Roí stepped forwards and grabbed Tabby by the hair. The giant yanked at

her, forcing Tabby to turn her face up. Her eyes roved blindly in the darkness. She tried to pull away, but his other hand cupped her chin and wrenched her head around savagely. Cú Roí leant in close until his face was only an inch from hers, their noses almost touching. For a second, Sam thought he might kiss her, and that jerking sense of doubt and pain flipped over in his stomach. Then Cú Roí finished his examination and let go. Tabby slumped to the floor, crying once more. Cú Roí turned back to Sam.

A worthy gift. I am pleased with you Samuel Autumn. Take her to the birthing pits. I will attend to her later. Tonight, you must lock yourself away, Samuel Autumn.

Sam stared at him for a second, nonplussed at the tangent. ‘What?’ Leach stepped forwards and clubbed him in the face. The move was so swift, Sam had no time to react. He fell to the floor. ‘Master,’ he added through angry, gritted teeth.

Cú Roí didn’t seem to notice. *There is a room prepared for you downstairs. You must lock yourself in tonight. That is my command, and it will be obeyed. Take your friend with you.* He turned away from Sam, ending the conversation. *Leach; attend me.* Cú Roí walked away into the darkness of the abandoned station.

For a second, Sam stood still. What friend? He shrugged. It was not for him to question his Master. Then a soft scrape came from behind him, inaudible but for his preternatural hearing. Sam froze. Tabby was lying still on the floor, her crying a quiet, miserable thing. The noise came again – the infinitesimal whisper of somebody trying to creep up on him. Spinning, Sam launched himself at the sound and cannoned into soft, sweet-smelling flesh.

He bore the interloper to the floor, and the two struggled in a jumble of legs and arms. His opponent did not put up much of a fight. He found himself looking into a pair of big eyes.

‘Annalise? What are you doing here?’ He stayed on top of her, pinning her, enjoying the warmth of her body: enjoying the power of having her under his control.

‘I don’t know – I couldn’t resist coming here. It was like I was being ...’

‘Summoned?’ Sam asked her knowingly.

‘Yes, summoned.’

‘Do you feel different?’

‘I ... yes. I feel stronger. Hungrier. What’s happening?’

Sam said, ‘Can you see me?’

‘Of course I can see you. What sort of a stupid question is that? Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?’

‘It’s dark as sin in here, Annalise. You shouldn’t be able to see anything.’ Sam watched her face as realisation dawned.

‘I hadn’t ... I’ve been confused ...’ Her words trailed away. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know. I was bitten, and now I am a god.’

‘You bit me. In the hotel room. On the thigh.’

Sam heard Tabby’s breathing change, and he laughed out loud. He’d hit her, kidnapped her, brought her to this hellhole, and she still found it in herself to be outraged that he had slept with another woman. ‘Come with me,’ he said to Annalise. He stood up and went back to Tabby. Effortlessly, he threw his wife over a shoulder.

‘Who’s that?’ Annalise asked.

‘She is my wife. Now she’s the Master’s meat.’ Annalise followed him through the abandoned station to the birthing pits. Amongst the cries and screams of the abducted women, there were now growls and roars, and the noise of snapping bone and rending flesh. The big room was thick with the smell of blood and ruptured bowels, of misery and despair. Sam revelled in it. He walked to an empty pit and threw Tabby into it. She landed heavily, and a moan of pain and terror escaped from behind her gag.

‘What now?’ Annalise asked.

‘We have to lock ourselves in tonight. But first, I’m going to fuck you here, where that simpering whore I married can hear us.’

Annalise began unbuttoning her shirt. ‘Okay,’ she said with a nasty smile.

MARK

THE NIGHT VISION GOGGLES GAVE THE DERELICT BUILDING A WEIRD GREEN GLOW. Mark observed silently as Autumn pushed the girl over the lip of the hole. He watched dispassionately for a couple of minutes, and then made his careful way out of the station.

Once he was back beneath the night sky, he took deep gulps of air to try and clear the filth from his nose. Walking quickly back to his car, he slipped the goggles from his face and massaged his temples with his free hand. Mark was shaken. He had watched Autumn take his hostage inside and had slipped in after him silently, using a pair of AN/PVS-14 goggles – the US Army’s preferred monocular night vision device – to see with. The goggles came from the specialist kit in the Corvette; he had the two Browning pistols with him too. Though he didn’t know what effect they might have on Autumn, he reasoned that a bullet in the brainpan was likely to slow most things down. Hell, he had thought he might shoot Autumn a couple of times just for good measure.

Sneaking in and rescuing Tabitha had seemed like a good idea. After seeing the other creatures that infested this place, he had changed his mind.

There was a thump from somewhere above him, and a concussive blast of air nearly knocked him to the ground. He looked up into the night and had a brief vision of something large moving off to the south. He pulled his goggles back to his face but by the time he had them set, whatever it was had vanished. A small plane flying very low perhaps? Somehow, he doubted it.

Shrugging, Mark reached into the glove compartment and got his phone. He leaned against the side of the car and dialled a number. While it rang, he looked at his watch. It was nearly four. The sun would be rising in four hours. The call connected.

‘Sergei?’

‘Mr. Jones.’

‘I’ve found the girl. She’s at an abandoned building in Manchester City Centre. Do you have the coordinates for all the places I have been tonight?’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Good. I want you to go to the address Autumn went to earlier. There’s a young man there. I want you to pick him up and take him back to my house. I will meet you there.’

‘What about the girl, Sir?’

He thought about the pit and the two things fucking beside it. ‘It’s bad, Sergei. We’ve got a lot of work to do when the sun comes up.’

SUNDAY



MARK

The news channel concentrated solely on the north-west. Mark watched glumly as the headline banner rolled past slowly at the bottom of the screen. The anchor was speaking excitedly about three murders. A young man had been found dismembered yesterday afternoon. A dead body had been found in the Hilton Hotel in the early evening. Another murder victim had turned up in a field in Yorkshire this morning.

The Hilton Hotel victim had not yet been identified. The young man was a shop assistant, and the latest victim was some two-bit magician known mainly for his general incompetence. All three had been killed violently, just like the psychic, and the press were eagerly pushing a vampire killer angle.

Mark thought differently. He knew Autumn had killed the man in the hotel. He also knew that he could not have made it to Yorkshire in time for the third death, because Mark had been watching him. That meant there was another killer. Jason walked into the room.

‘I got what you asked for, Mr. Jones. I had to call in some favours ...’

‘Thank you,’ Mark said coldly, cutting the big man off. Jason handed him the police reports regarding the recent spate of killings, and he flicked through them quickly. The injuries to the victims were horrific. They had all been partially cannibalised. The lead police officer – somebody called Hildemare – was

baffled. Mark threw the papers down on his desk and frowned. ‘Where is Sergei?’

‘In the kitchen with Rowan.’

‘Ah yes, Rowan. What do you think of him?’

‘He’s a Royal Marine Commando. I think he’ll be useful. Sergei likes him.’

‘How is he?’

‘Restless – he wants to go after his sister. You should talk to him. Tell him the plan.’

Mark glanced out of the kitchen window. The first rays of dawn were slowly punching their way through a grey blanket of cloud that had been thickening over the last hour or so. A fine drizzle was misting down from the sky. The world outside was grey and bleak, and the sky held the cold. ‘I think I’ll do that,’ he said.

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THE SHOTGUN BLAST TORE THROUGH THE HOWLING. CAM PUMPED THE BREACH and nearly dropped the flashlight. Why on earth hadn’t they had any that could clip onto the barrel of his gun? Like in the movies? It seemed like a bit of an oversight now. He jumped over the thing that had managed to duck past Grímnir’s chainsaw. The noise was not scaring the Twisted anymore. They kept coming in threes and fours, lurching out of doorways or from around blind corners in the darkness, with their crazed faces a contorted smear of snarling teeth and maggoty rot.

Cam thought it was very fortunate that they were mindless – if they had organised and attacked in force, the small group would have been in dire straits. As it was, they were making progress against the hordes. Grímnir was a rock up front. The Twisted broke against him, the chainsaw ripping them to pieces.

On more than one occasion, Cam had been forced to kick away a grasping hand still attached to the top part of a sundered zombie. They didn't die unless they were decapitated, but Dow and Grímnir were concentrating on speed, not thoroughness, so crawling body parts had to be ignored. A carpet of moaning, crippled zombies lay strewn out behind them.

'How far?' Dow called from the rear. 'More will be coming!' The Twisted were fast, and every now and again Dow was forced to turn and fight them off. Cam would stop and aim the shotgun, but it was never needed – Dow was lethal. His gauntlets were a web of destruction in the electric light.

Fucking flashlight! It was difficult to fire a shotgun when you had to juggle a big tube, but somehow Cam was managing. There was no way he was losing the light down here.

'Just around the next corner,' Grímnir shouted back. 'It is a dead end, so none of the Twisted should be there ahead of us.'

'What?' Cam and Dow yelled at the same time. 'What dead end?' Cam added, but it was too late. They were committed. They ran on, around a tight corner, through a dusty room, and then through a raw, narrow doorway that had been hacked out of the rock.

Cam stopped dead in the roughly hewn portal and blinked. Dow ran into him from behind. 'What's the matter?' Dow shouted in his ear. Cam gestured wordlessly, and Dow looked over his shoulder. 'Oh my,' he said quietly.

The opening they were stood in was set into the wall of a gargantuan vertical shaft. The ceiling – if there was one – was lost in a murk of hazy darkness. The air was as thick and humid as a muggy summer's day, and tendrils of cloud reached here and there, muddying the vast space above them. A golden light glowed far below. Looking down into the light gave Cam a brief but overwhelming sense of vertigo, like floating midway up an inverted well with sky below and dark depths above. Somewhere a long way down, there must be a big hole in the side of The Tower, letting some of the dawn's light in. Above him, beyond the clouds, it faded into the gloom.

The shaft was around five-hundred feet across. A fat droplet of ice-cold water fell down the back of Cam's neck, making him jump. He cursed and

glanced up. The black walls looked like they had been carved from one gigantic piece of obsidian. Rivulets of water ran in drips and dribbles down the glassy surface, weaving their way towards the buried light and causing a soft rustling whisper that echoed hauntingly.

The shaft above and below was criss-crossed with brittle boughs of rock that spanned the vertiginous drop. Above, fifteen or twenty of these fragile, thread-thin crossings disappeared into a misty gloaming. Below, they were framed by the light and Cam could see that some of them had been shattered. He imagined that he was looking down into the neglected and splintered remains of a deity's infinite Kerplunk set.

Cam had the awful feeling that he might end up playing the part of the marble. Ahead of him, the floor tapered into a narrow spindle of rock that arced out to span the bore. Only two feet wide, it had no rail or balustrade. The black stone was polished and slippery with dew. In places, great gashes cut its width down to less than a foot. Cam poked a tentative foot out onto the awful delicate bridge. It groaned.

'I'm not going across that!' Cam stated resolutely.

'We've got to,' Dow shouted over his shoulder. 'They're right behind us.' Grímnir was already halfway across, jogging along as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing such a big man move with such speed across such a narrow strip made Cam feel nauseous. The thought of going over it himself made him gag.

'I'm not doing it.'

'We've no time for this,' Dow snapped.

'Do I look like a fucking tightrope walker?' he asked. 'I've never even been to the circus!'

'Just get moving,' Dow growled. 'I can see them!'

The howling was loud now, and Cam grudgingly conceded that maybe the bridge wasn't that bad an idea after all. 'I'll be best mates with Joey the Dog Faced boy next,' he grumbled as he edged forwards, his hands held out for balance.

There was an animalistic scream from behind him, and he looked back. A

couple of ORCs had reached the bridge; Dow was fighting them off ferociously. One fell from the edge, and Cam watched as its body slammed sickeningly against a black wall far below.

‘Oh shit,’ he said. Dow crept backwards, his gauntlets flashing out. Cam dropped the flashlight – he couldn’t keep hold of it and maintain his balance when the shotgun kicked. The light disappeared into the brighter depths of the shaft.

Another group of Twisted rushed onto the bridge. They shambled forwards in a precarious single file. The front one grasped wildly for Dow. Its face had completely rotted off, leaving nothing but a skull with sharp yellow teeth and a pair of unblinking black eyes. A worm flicked its tail languidly from its nasal cavity. Its hairline was a green and black obscenity: a ragged line of fleshy scraps, like a blanket that had been ripped apart, thread and weave dangling awry over the scarred bone of its skull. Incongruously, a luxurious black mane fell from ruined scalp to broken shoulders. The noise of the mob was getting louder. The bulk of the Twisted were not far behind. Cam set his feet as steady as he could, as Dow backed towards him.

‘Push them back – push them back, and then for God’s sake duck!’ Dow looked over his shoulder, saw Cam, saw the levelled shotgun, and nodded. He surged forwards and his foot slipped on the treacherous rock. Cam held his breath, certain that Dow was going to fall. Then the Elf recovered and put everything he had into a left hook. The Death’s Head zombie ducked and then slipped. It fell flat on its stomach, grabbed the stonework, and clung on. Dow’s gauntlet drove the creature behind it from the bridge, and it screeched as it tumbled into oblivion. Dow ducked.

Cam pulled the trigger. The three Twisted that were still stood up exploded in a cloud of congealed blood and grey guts. The awful mass of spinning refuse tumbled towards the light. The recoil was a bitch; Cam flailed wildly to catch his balance, and eventually settled his heels on the narrow bridge. His ears rang. Dow aimed a kick at the Death’s Head zombie, but it scampered nimbly on all fours back to the edge of the bridge. It stood and stared at them. The crazed howling of the hoard came from the door behind it. Edging forwards, Cam put

his hand on Dow's shoulder and then they moved backwards slowly together.

The Death's Head zombie turned and disappeared back the way they had all come. Moments later, a surging mass of the Twisted spilled mindlessly out onto the bridge. In the end, it was their sheer numbers that saved Cam and Dow. It was ridiculous, really. If the Twisted had come steadily, one at a time, no doubt they would have overwhelmed the two Elves. Instead, overcome by feral hunger, the ORCs charged out all at once; a torrent of shoving monsters. Almost all of them fell immediately, jostled over the edge by those behind, pushing and clawing at each other as they slipped into the abyss. A steady stream plummeted down the great bore, and every single one howled. Hundreds of the Twisted tumbled to oblivion.

Some managed to keep their feet, and they scampered agile and snarling towards Dow and Cam. Cam lost track of the number of times they had to stop and brace themselves for an attack. Dow's lashing gauntlets pummelled zombies and they were pitched, crushed and broken, into the void.

By the time they reached the far side, Cam was gasping for breath and sweating heavily. They pressed themselves into the relative safety of a small alcove that contained a door. Cam leant forwards and kissed a cold, black wall. 'I think I've shit myself,' he announced to nobody in particular. A meaty hand slapped him on the shoulder, and he winced.

'That was well done, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha, well done indeed,' Grímnir told him.

'Thank you,' Dow added sincerely. 'Your shot saved my life.'

'Come off it,' Cam said. 'If you'd fallen, I'd have been next. And I never would have made it across without you.'

'Nevertheless, thank you.' Dow turned to Grímnir. 'More of them will manage to cross soon. Where next?'

Wordlessly, Grímnir pointed to the door. It was massive and appeared to be made of the same stone as the shaft. 'This is the home of the Tattooist,' he said.

'How do we get in?' Cam asked.

Grímnir looked at him as if he were stupid. 'We knock.'

Samuel

SWIRLING CLOUDS MOVED IN A SLOW WHIRLPOOL ABOVE SAM'S HEAD. THE blacks and greys of the drifting behemoths were edged with deep lilac light. Reds and oranges were mixed into the vortex: streaks of colour stirred into the sky like strawberry sauce into frozen yoghurt. The desert beneath it was bleak, the coarse sand made ochre in the half-light. The occasional dead-looking cactus or a random cairn of stones did little to break up the flat wilderness. The horizons were lost in grey, hazy mist.

Sam stood in the eldritch landscape and wondered what he was doing here. With a start, he saw that he was naked. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep next to Annalise's naked, sweating body in a small room in Mayfield Station. He turned on his heel and stared around the unfamiliar desert in consternation. Then the pain started.

It came from his spine, flaring out to grip the muscles of his chest and neck. It crawled insidiously down into his abdominals, causing them to spasm. Sam collapsed to his knees, folded over at the waist, a scream frozen and silent on his lips. It hit his arms next, then his legs, cramping them in agonising waves. Sweat broke out on his body: cold stinging sweat that fell to the gritty ground in thick, ugly droplets. Where they landed, tiny black blossoms flowered.

For a moment the pain subsided, retreating to the small of his back where it had originated. Sam raised his head and screamed in torment. With eyes opened wide, he saw the wolf staring back at him, so close he could have reached out and touched it. Yellow eyes bored into his, its lips were peeled back in a snarl, the stiff fur on the back of its neck raised and bristling.

The wolf was black. Silver streaks rose from its front paws and wrapped around its shoulders. They merged, forming a widow's peak which ran between its eyes and down the centre of its broad muzzle. Long, wicked canines dipped

from the top jaw to the lower lip. He had seen this before. Somewhere, in darkness ... he had dreamt it after he started on the prophylaxis, back when he was still with Tabby and the world had been a much more complicated place. Friday night.

A low growl rippled through the air between them, and Sam realised with a jolt that it was coming from him. The wolf tensed slightly. Sam was concentrating on those massive teeth when the pain came crashing back with a vengeance, twice as fast, twice as painful, tearing through him and paralysing him. His arms jerked outwards spasmodically just as the wolf leapt.

Hard teeth fastened on his throat. He had felt this before, too, on a cold road in the pouring rain. The wolf tore ferociously at the flesh of his neck. Sam could do nothing but stare up. He felt a merging ...

The clouds stopped swirling and solidified far above his head. Then the sky sped down towards him and the light died. His night vision was good, perfect, and he watched, waiting for the moment he would be crushed to bloody paste.

Red brick hung several feet above his head. Sam took a quick breath. He looked around. He was in the small room in the Mayfield Station. A golden creature with black spots crouched across the room, staring at him. He stared back, wondering what he should do.

The thing was big, and it looked vicious. It had yellow cat's eyes and stood on all fours, though Sam thought it might stand upright if it wanted to. A thick, wedge-shaped head hosted a square jaw that bristled with big, evil-looking teeth. Its paws – if they could be called paws – had a distinct primate twist to them: long talons extended from the end of simian fingers. He tried to speak, but a growl came from his throat. The leopard creature growled back, and Sam lifted a hand up in a gesture of peace.

Great talons extended from his fingers, like those of the monster across from him. He realised he was also crouched on all fours. His chest was massive, barrel-like, and covered in coarse black fur, just like the wolf from his dream. His stomach was similarly coated, as were his thick, muscular arms. He stood and felt a surge of power in his legs. Reaching up, he felt his mouth, and razor-like talons nicked his long muzzle.

Roaring with sudden fear, he looked for an exit. The door was shut. He made his way over and stared at it, but he couldn't remember how to open it. With terrifying speed, intelligence began to seep away. He clung desperately to his conscious mind, but it was becoming more and more difficult. Familiar pangs of hunger were rising in him, and it was getting harder and harder to concentrate on anything else.

A hiss of a snarl came from behind him. The creature that had been Sam spun just in time to catch the leopard thing in his arms. It tore a chunk from his shoulder. The tang of his own blood filled the room, and the last of his reason fled away. Then there was only the fight for survival.

SAM WOKE, NAKED AND TWISTED UP IN ANNALISE'S LIMBS. THE ROOM WAS A scarred and pitted bomb site. The walls were lashed with massive talon marks that had been scored into the brick. The door was similarly scarred and dented. What little furniture there was – an old bureau of some sort and a flimsy desk – had been dashed into splinters. Smears and speckles of powdery blood were everywhere.

Standing up, he stretched and groaned as bones clicked and distended, snapping back into place. Annalise moaned and rolled onto her knees. Her heavy breasts swung free, and Sam felt a surge of desire wash through him. He reached out to her, but she slapped his hand away absently.

'Did you dream?' she asked.

'Yes – something about a wolf ...' He looked at the devastation around him, then back at Annalise. 'You?'

'A leopard.'

Sam remembered the golden creature he had fought in his dreams.

The door swung open with a groan, and Cú Roí stepped in with Leach lurking behind him. Cú Roí looked around and nodded. *The change is upon you*, he said, his voice washing around Sam's mind like a thrashing worm. *Soon, you will be able to control it.*

‘This is normal?’ Sam demanded. Leach stepped in and his hand lashed towards Sam’s face. He caught it and stared into the man’s bulbous eyes. ‘Master,’ he added after a long moment. Leach stepped away.

You are one of my children, now. Both of you are. The rewards are unimaginable. Get dressed and join me. I have some questions for you, Samuel Autumn. Cú Roí turned and walked away.

Leach slung some ripe-looking clothes on the floor in front of them and then followed his Master. After they had gone, Sam began to laugh. ‘What is it?’ Annalise asked.

He reached out and pulled her to him, his hand slipping down to cup a buttock. ‘Don’t you get it? I’m a fucking werewolf!’ He began to laugh again, and only stopped when she dragged his face down into a hungry kiss.

Camhlaidh

FLAMING EYES FLICKERED AND SPAT OUT OF A BLACK FACE. THE TATTOOIST stared at his uninvited guests with undisguised hostility. At least that’s what Cam thought it was – it was difficult to get a good handle on emotions when twin balls of fire sat in place of honest eyeballs.

Dow seemed just as worried as Cam. He stood to one side; one gauntleted fist pushed into the palm of his other in an absent display of aggression. Grímnir, on the other hand, had greeted the Tattooist with a cry of pleasure and a bone-breaking hug, the tattoos on his biceps stretching as muscles swelled with the effort. The Tattooist had pushed him off irately before shooing them into the room behind the thick door. He peered out over the flimsy bridge suspiciously and harrumphed when he saw the zombies milling at the other end. Then, ducking back, the Tattooist pushed the heavy door closed with an ominous *thunk*. It must be counterbalanced, Cam thought to himself.

Once the solid barrier had clunked back into place the Tattooist released the ratchet on a nearby winch and a heavy portcullis dropped down from the ceiling with a deafening clang, effectively sealing the door shut. The Tattooist turned to face them. His eyes blazed, great loops of fire spilled down his face, and his mouth turned down into an ugly moue.

Grímnir wasted no time. ‘Hello, my old friend, I need your help.’

‘I thought you were dead,’ the Tattooist snapped.

Cam looked around. They were in a large vestibule. It was two storeys tall and around the size of a fairly decent hotel lobby. The ceiling was high above them; cross-hatched beams were lost in the shadows of its vaulted depths. The walls were coarse grey limestone, more suited to the rearing balustrades of a castle than an entrance hall.

Cam put the door to his back. It was comforting to have a solid slab of stone between him and the ORCs. There was an archway opposite him, around fifty feet away across irregular slate flags that made up the ground floor. It punched through the far wall and was big enough to comfortably drive a van through. Beyond it, Cam could see green lawns, and beyond them, the rich pastels of daybreak. Inside, a balcony ran above the arch, jutting out from the back wall to create a long gallery with doors facing each other at either end. Where the gallery met the doors, it swept around corners of the room and then turned into twin stairways that descended to the grey stone floor, curving like a bull’s horns. There were two more doors, one set in the wall at the base of each stair.

A stained-glass window, a huge affair of lambent red and blue-green, was set in the gallery wall. The same size and shape, it was a counterpoint to the arch directly below it. The window glowed soft rose and aquamarine. The light spilling through the arch, unfiltered and raw, was bright and cheerful in comparison.

They were back at the edge of The Tower. Cam wanted nothing more than to walk between the stairways and through the arch they flanked. He took an unconscious step towards the light; it was the first he had seen in what felt like a very long time. He desperately wanted to gaze out on the perpetual dawn that embraced this reality.

The Tattooist placed a hand on his chest to stop him. Cam could feel its heat even through his clothes. The Tattooist was a huge man with jet black skin. It was not the black of somebody whose ethnic origins lay in Africa: it was the complete black of night. His hair was henna-red, stuck up in deranged clumps from his scalp, and his lips were thin and bloodless white. He wore a dirty grey robe that fell rather ridiculously to his shins, and his slim frame and hunched shoulders should have made him look like an escaped lunatic. He should have looked comical, but any desire Cam might have had to laugh never made it further than his hindbrain because of the Tattooist's eyes.

'He's an Ifrit,' Cam hissed at Dow.

'But I am not deaf,' the Tattooist's words were full of contempt.

'Oh, er, sorry?' Cam muttered.

The Tattooist ignored him. His attention was firmly placed on Grímnir. 'What are you doing here?' The words were anything but welcoming.

'We need to find the Maiden.'

'And you came here? You've brought those freaks right to my front door.'

'Well, there is some poetic justice there,' Dow muttered.

'What? What did you say?' spat the Tattooist.

'You heard me, Ifrit. Your kind created those monsters; maybe it's right that you should be besieged by them.' He turned back to Grímnir. 'Why have you brought us to this creature?'

'Ignorant whelp,' the Tattooist said. He stepped towards Dow, his fingers flexing and the fires of his eyes spilling brighter to his cheeks. Cam suddenly became very aware of how tall the Ifrit was. Easily seven feet. His length made him appear slight, but on closer inspection, it was obvious that the Tattooist rivalled Grímnir for breadth.

'Er,' Cam said.

Dow stepped towards the Tattooist, his own face a mask of rage. Grímnir stepped between them and thrust out with both hands. Dow stumbled and fell on his arse. The Tattooist was more difficult to move, but even he was forced backwards two inexorable steps.

'Stop this,' Grímnir growled. 'You do not know his story, but he can be

trusted,’ he said to Dow as the angry Elf hauled himself back to his feet. ‘These are good men who have risked themselves to help me,’ he said to the Tattooist. ‘Old hatreds die hard – I know this better than most. But we have a common enemy, and for now we must work together. Now still your tongues, or I will put both of you out onto the bridge until you make your peace.’ Cam did not doubt that Grímnir would do just that. The big man stared at Dow and the Tattooist until he received a nod from each of them. ‘Good. Now, is there somewhere we can sit and talk?’

‘Follow me,’ the Tattooist said and walked to the closest door on their left. Great bands of iron crossed its width, held in place by huge spikes with flattened heads. The Tattooist pulled it open and ushered Grímnir through. Dow followed after a pointed pause. Cam walked to the door and put a hand against it. A series of thick industrial-looking deadbolts were attached to the inside.

‘Why is it so big? This thing looks like it was designed to stop a battering-ram.’

‘This whole place is a fortress,’ the Tattooist snapped. ‘There are alternative exits through the apartments either side of this hallway, and each of these doors is strong enough to keep an army out. They’re a failsafe. Do you know why that is, Elf?’

‘Erm ...’

‘It’s because,’ the Tattooist continued over him, ‘I live alone deep in a magical Tower infested with ravening monsters. I’ve survived for centuries without them even knowing I was here, but I’m the paranoid type. That’s why I live hidden away down here. And being the paranoid type, I thought that one day some idiot – some incredible dolt, some fantastical thick-headed nincompoop, some unbelievable ignoramus ... some ... some ... some ...’ the Tattooist trailed off, apparently so angry that he was lost for words.

‘Wanker?’ Cam suggested helpfully.

The Tattooist glowered at him. Looping streams of incandescent fire spat from his eyes, and Cam turned his face away from the heat.

‘Wanker. Yes. That’s exactly it. I always thought that some wanker might bring them down on me. And here you are. Now get in there.’

Cam nodded and stepped quickly through the door. The Tattooist closed the door and pointedly slid all the deadbolts into place. They were in a kitchen. A big hearth was embedded into the wall on their right. There was a spit across it. A solid-looking table sat nearby, with matching chairs set neatly around it. Various chopping boards and a couple of kitchen knives rested on the scarred work surface.

Around the wall, a series of crude cupboards had been put up. A crackling fire was set into the hearth, and the kitchen was hot and smoky. The Tattooist walked through this room and through another door opposite. This door was more normal – a simple wooden affair without locks or other reinforcement. A comfortable sitting room lay beyond it with yet another door opposite them. A large window lay open in the right-hand wall, and beyond it Cam could see what looked like trees. He gaped at them.

‘There is a large balcony on this level with a small forest on it.’ The Tattooist shrugged as if this were the most natural thing in the world. Cam had to concede that for *The Tower at Dawn*, it wasn’t really that strange.

They sunk into comfortable leather-bound chairs around a table and stared at each other suspiciously. ‘Take off your shirt,’ the Tattooist said to Grímnir. The big man pulled off the jerkin. The Tattooist stood and walked over to him. He started poking at the tattoos that covered Grímnir’s body with a long, spindly finger. Cam stared at the blue and green snakes that covered his pale flesh. He thought, not for the first time, that there was something very creepy about them. He was sure they squirmed when he wasn’t looking directly at them.

‘They are still fresh – they have not faded. Incredible.’

‘I lost the sword.’

‘Camulus? You lost Camulus? How could you be so stupid?’

‘I am sorry – I impaled Cú Roí as he fled. I don’t remember much after that. Just pain ... and reawakening in this time.’

‘If you are resurrected ...’

‘Cú Roí has returned,’ Grímnir said.

‘At least we know the spells I worked into your body were successful. I never expected them to be so powerful.’

‘Broken bones can still be problematic if they set wrong.’

‘Stop whining! You’re back from the dead and you worry about a crooked arm or leg? Just break them and set them again. Back from the dead ...’ He turned and looked at Dow. ‘I assume your masters have thought about the worth of such spells? The power they represent?’

‘Of course they have,’ Dow snapped. ‘Grímnir Vafthrúdnir refuses to relinquish the magic that might save us all.’

‘Bah,’ the Tattooist scoffed. ‘Grímnir is right. You might buy a few extra years. More likely, it would be a few months. The magic is safe where it is, bonded to his flesh with ink. To remove it would see it trickle away like piss down a hill. No, unless they have a plan – some spell ready to be cast – Grímnir may as well use it to track down and destroy Cú Roí. He is the real threat.’

‘And what do you know, Ifrit?’

The Tattooist ignored Dow. ‘Where is Cú Roí now?’ he asked Grímnir.

‘Back in Miðgarðr. I need to find the Maiden. I could not get close enough to kill Cú Roí. He escaped, and I cannot afford for that to happen again. He is too dangerous. Too strong.’

‘Yes, he is.’ The Tattooist frowned. ‘And we have become weak. Why has he returned now? There is something here that we are overlooking. The Maiden may be able to help us. But we must be quick – Cú Roí will be growing more powerful every day.’

‘How can he?’ Cam asked with an exhausted yawn. ‘The magic is dying. He is in the same situation as the rest of us.’

‘No. Cú Roí is a new breed. His father was the Last of the First, a freak – a Svartálfar called Trauco-Lilû, who was able to mate with other species. He bred with a human first, and his by-blows still thrive in the world of men. Before he was exiled for that perversion, Trauco-Lilû forced himself upon an Ifrit female. The result of the rape was Cú Roí.

‘The child’s mother wanted to throw her son from the top of The Tower at Dusk, but a powerful faction of scholars – representatives of both Courts – protected the child. Foremost amongst them was an Elf called Morgaene Lè Euhirudinea, a biologist and philosopher. The people of The Towers do not

change; we are eternal, but stagnant. Yet here was a mutant, a changeling, that Morgaene could not – would not – ignore. Poor Morgaene. He was the first of Cú Roí disciples. The first to be corrupted. He’s called Leach, now.’

‘This is all very interesting,’ Cam said, ‘but in a few years’ time, Cú Roí – if he exists – will die just like the rest of us.’

‘Cú Roí is unique and very powerful. Morgaene and his cult called him the Miracle Child, and with good reason. They thought he represented the future, a chance for us to grow – to evolve! They did not see Cú Roí as the abomination he truly was. Yes, our magic would sustain him. But the humans have their own magic, divorced from ours, and Cú Roí thrives on it.

‘It does not matter to the Miracle Child that the land is dying. He will seek out those humans with magical talents, and he will feed on them. Cú Roí will harvest immense power, and he will use it to build an army of shape-shifters and monsters that will put your worst nightmares to shame ... that would put my worst nightmares to shame, and I guarantee that mine would stop your heart.’ He smiled, and the flames of his eyes crackled mockingly as he looked around the room. ‘Cú Roí will continue to grow in power until he is invincible. Time is against us.’

‘Us?’ Cam asked.

The Ifrit turned its fiery gaze back on him, and he felt the heat of its glare. ‘I will be coming with you, of course.’

‘Unacceptable,’ Dow said flatly.

‘You have no choice in the matter, Elf. Where we need to go, you’re going to need me.’

‘Where is the Maiden?’ Grímnir asked.

The Tattooist said, ‘She came through here after The Transmogrification. She was profoundly disturbed – she said the fate of her people was somehow connected to the Miracle Child. I told her what I knew, but it was no more than she did. She said she needed more information; she needed to go to where Cú Roí came from. The Maiden has gone to The Tower at Dusk, and that is where we must follow.’

MARK

‘I CAN’T JUST SIT HERE – THAT MADMAN’S GOT MY SISTER!’

Rowan’s voice was angry and loud. Mark could hear it as he walked through the dark corridor that led to the kitchen. ‘You have to be patient. You’re a marine – you know this. Without a plan, we’ll all get killed.’ Sergei’s accented voice was calm and composed.

‘Fuck the plan. I need to go and get my sister. God knows what’s happening to her.’

Mark stopped just outside the door and listened. ‘It won’t be long,’ said Sergei. ‘Mr. Jones is an intelligent man, and he has the resources to ensure that any mission we mount is a success. You need him ...’

‘I don’t need anybody,’ Rowan interrupted.

Sergei’s voice rose sharply. ‘Stop being an idiot, boy! Mr. Jones has money, weapons, men ... I have worked for him for some time, and I have discovered him to be as ruthless as he is cunning. You need him. You have seen what we are up against, and you know that on your own, you will get both you and your sister killed. Patience here is necessary. He will come up with a plan, and we will execute that plan with military precision. Do you understand?’

Rowan sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘It’s just ... it’s my sister is all.’

‘I know, my boy,’ Sergei said. ‘You have to be realistic about these things. Simply running in and gunning down anything that moves would be suicide.’

Outside the door, Mark smiled thinly to himself. Then he stepped into the kitchen. Rowan was pacing around with a grim expression on his face. Sergei was sitting on a stool at the black granite breakfast bar. Both men turned to face him.

‘It’s time,’ he said flatly. ‘Equipment is in the garage. I’ll meet you both there

in five minutes.’ He turned to leave.

Rowan’s voice stopped him. ‘What’s the plan?’ he asked, his steel tooth glinting.

‘We’re going to run in there and gun down anything that moves.’ He absorbed their silence for a moment, and then he walked from the kitchen.

Camhlaidh

‘BLOOD AND SPIT,’ THE TATTOOIST SAID. ‘THAT’S WHAT YOU’VE GOT TO WATCH out for. You Elves, at least.’ He looked at Dow and narrowed his flaming eyes. ‘The infection is carried in their blood and spit. The Jötnar are vulnerable too, but the spells on Grímnir’s body will protect him.’

‘What about you?’ Dow asked.

‘I have never been exposed, and neither have any of my kind.’ He shrugged. ‘I do not know if I can be turned into one of those things, and I prefer not to find out. Blood and spit – do not let them bite you; do not get any of their blood in an open wound, in your mouth, in your eyes. You use weapons that cut and spray blood – it is a miracle that none of you have been infected already. Even that monstrous thing the boy carries over his shoulder is dangerous.’ Cam stroked the shotgun protectively and pulled a face. The Tattooist deigned not to notice. ‘Just one drop of blood in a tear duct is enough. That is why guns proved so ineffective ... they spread the infection.’

‘I knew all of that. I was hoping to sneak us through. I anticipated meeting one or two ORCs. But there was an ... incident and the horde swarmed. We fought our way clear. Grímnir has been leading. He has borne the brunt of the blood splatter,’ Dow said. ‘If he is immune, as you say, it explains how we survived,’ he added thoughtfully.

‘That makes some sense, but you were still very, very lucky. If you ever have

to come this way again, you must all wear scarves around your faces, and keep any open wounds covered. Since our path leads in another direction, I think we can do without.'

'We are not going back?' Grímnir asked.

The Tattooist said, 'No – there is a Ring in a set of rooms across the hallway. We will use that to enter The Tower at Dusk.'

'And what then?' Cam demanded.

'We must find Camulus and kill Cú Roí,' Grímnir said.

'Can't we kill him without the sword?' Dow asked.

'No. Cú Roí is special,' Grímnir said wearily.

'He is as close to being truly immortal as is possible without being deified,' said the Tattooist. 'His offspring – the Barghest – are tough but can be killed using conventional methods, assuming you are able to find a part of its body that can receive a mortal wound. A Barghest doesn't have a heart; its tentacles pulsate to carry what passes as blood around its body. Its brain matter is spread through every appendage, making each one almost independent from the rest. Cutting a few away won't really bother it, and without destroying all of them, you cannot destroy its brain.

'There is a bundle of nerves above its mouth that will slow it down somewhat if you breach it, but even that won't kill one. The worm-like mass that the tentacles surround is just a big stomach. It expels waste through its skin as acidic slime, and it has few other organs. It is a perfect organism – very hard to hurt.

'Camulus will kill them, as it will kill anything else that carries fairy blood. Otherwise, they need to be completely destroyed. Fire is always the best way, or short of that, massive trauma. If they grow too big, though ... well, then you've got real problems.

'The Therians – those that are bitten by Cú Roí – are even harder to kill. They are shapeshifters, and completely invulnerable to physical harm. Anything that is cut away simply grows back.'

'So, they can't be killed?' Cam asked in dismay.

'Anything that walks can be killed if you know how,' the Tattooist said flatly.

‘Fire,’ Grímnir said. ‘It is the only way to be sure. Fire will kill them, but they need to be burned to dust or they will come back. It is their bones that prove tricky – the flesh will burn away quickly enough, but their bones need to be destroyed as well, otherwise they will regenerate. Camulus will kill them as well.’

‘We need the sword then,’ Dow stated.

‘Yes.’

‘So, we go through to The Tower at Dusk and find the Maiden? Just like that?’ Cam asked.

‘Yes,’ said the Tattooist. ‘We must be careful, though; your kind are still unwelcome in The Tower at Dusk.’

‘Well, your kind aren’t really welcome here either, Ifrit,’ Dow snapped back.

The three of them began to argue about the politics of the Courts. Bored, Cam wandered back through to the kitchen. He unlocked the sturdy door and walked into the main entrance hall. The dawn’s light still spilled through the arch at the end of the room, and he made his way towards it.

Rays of light lanced down, catching particles of dust that spun and whirled on invisible convection currents in a crazed dance. Cam could smell clean morning air and the fresh tang of vegetation. The light caused his eyes to water as he stepped from under the arch, and he realised he had been in darkness for far too long.

Wiping away tears, he opened his eyes to the dawn’s rosy twilight and his heart leapt. The balcony jutted out from the side of The Tower like a fat lip. Looking up, Cam could see that there were other, similar balconies rearing out over the abyss above him. He could not see the top of The Tower – it was lost in a haze of wispy white cloud, rippling in the dawn sun. Large windows speckled the grey building with black dots.

Grass crinkled under Cam’s feet as he moved slowly towards the edge of the balcony. To his right and ahead of him the lawn glittered, emerald green scattered with the white of daisies. To his left, a large copse of trees – practically a forest – rose in dark profusion. The boles were evenly spaced, and light filtered down into the undergrowth in an intricate lattice.

Easing his way to the edge of the balcony, Cam leant out and looked down. He could not see The Tower, but other balconies were just about visible until they were lost in the rough sea of cloud that eased its way out to the horizon in soft waves. He pulled his head back and inhaled the sweet scent of morning dew and pollen. The sun was a swimming ball of fire, half-clothed in vapour, but rapidly, eternally burning its way through. Closing his eyes, Cam lifted his head to the rising sun and enjoyed its warm caress on his face.

After a moment of intense peace, he turned and rested his back against the low balustrade of thick stone, set to prevent an unwary – probably drunk – Elf from falling into the abyss. There was speculation that to fall from The Tower would be to fall forever.

Gazing up at the incredible piece of architecture, Cam was awed by how big it was. Looking left and right, he could see no curve to The Tower, and the edges were lost in more of that ubiquitous frosting of morning cloud. He shook his head and tried to fathom how a race that could create such a thing, wielders of magic that could support this impossible place, had come to such a low: begging for magic from a man sucked through time, while zombies rampaged through the basement.

A movement caught the corner of his eye and he looked up. One of the high windows – nothing but a black speck against the stonework – had split in two. Cam frowned in consternation. The black speck was moving steadily down from the window like a dark teardrop slipping down a corpse's cheek. Another one followed, and another, until a steady stream, like an army of ants, was descending the side of The Tower. Cam squinted, trying to make out what the strange phenomenon was.

Realisation struck him like a thunderbolt. He stiffened involuntarily, and a cold wave broke in his stomach. The lowest speck was out of sight behind the trees that rose up against that side of the building. They were coming onto the balcony. Cam looked for the door back into The Tower. He was surprised at how far away he was. He began running. As he did, he took a deep breath and screamed.

'They're coming,' he shouted as loud as he could. He reached the arch that

led into the Tattooist's residence at a flat-out sprint, screaming through burning lungs all the while. He stopped at the threshold and looked back over his shoulder. Lurching towards him at an incredible speed came the Death's Head zombie. A hundred other ravaged monsters loped behind it.

Cam fled into the safety of the building and ran quickly to where his two companions were still arguing with the Tattooist. 'They're here – they're coming. They crawled down the side of The Tower like a bunch of spiders!'

'What are you talking about?' the Tattooist demanded irritably. 'This place is impregnable. The door could hold off an army.'

'They're coming down the fucking walls,' Cam screamed, spittle flying from his lips. 'They're on the balcony.'

A great wail rose from beyond the door and Cam jumped. Then he spun and slammed it shut. He began piling chairs, and anything else he could find, up against the door. The others watched him, dumbfounded. Dow was the first to react. He jumped to his feet and pulled his gauntlets on. His face was flat and expressionless. Grímnir was only a second behind him.

'What are you doing? Didn't you lock the other door?' the Tattooist asked. Cam didn't answer. 'Damn it,' the Tattooist said. 'Damn it!' he screamed. 'It's built to withstand an army, and you didn't bother to lock it! I knew this would happen!'

'Well I'm sorry,' Cam screamed back at him, 'but I had other things on my mind. I mean Christ, you gave me that lecture about building your own fortress of fucking solitude, why didn't you think to put locks on all the doors?'

'Because there wasn't any need! The defences are more than adequate if you bother to use them. Numbskull! Fool! Pea-brain!'

'Wanker – yeah, I've got it,' Cam panted as he thrust a sideboard against the door. A bang from the other side of the door caused the clutter of furniture in front of it to shudder. 'It's that one that looks like fucking Skeletor. It's smart; it ducked when I fired the shotgun on the bridge, and it worked out how to get down here. That's the one we've got to worry about.'

'I think it's best to worry about all of them,' Dow said.

'You brought them down on me, you imbeciles,' the Tattooist screamed

again, his eyes flaring painfully bright with white fire. A flayed arm smashed through the window. A thing with no lower jaw glared balefully at them, attempting to climb through the narrow aperture. Grímnir walked over calmly and slammed a huge fist into its temple, crushing its skull. It flopped down the side of the wall, half in and half out of the room. The creatures outside pulled at the now inanimate corpse.

‘Is there another way out?’ Dow barked at the Tattooist.

‘Of course there is. If we continue through this suite of rooms, there’s a back way out. But it would be better to cross the hall.’

‘How can that be better?’ Cam asked. ‘I vote for the way that doesn’t take us through a mob of dead cannibals with compulsive eating disorders.’

‘Because that route will take us back into The Tower,’ the Tattooist said. ‘I don’t know where the nearest Ring is from there. The Twisted would hunt us through the corridors, run us to exhaustion like a pack of wolves.’ His voice went quiet; introspective. ‘And there will be more of them. Many more, waiting in the darkness. Waiting for us. And they are hungry.’

Cam actually gulped. ‘We need a Ring,’ Dow said. ‘It would take us out of here, and we need to get to The Tower at Dusk anyway.’

‘There is a Ring; the one I mentioned,’ the Tattooist said. ‘That’s why we have to cross the hall. It’s in a room on the other side.’

‘Then that’s where we are going,’ Grímnir said.

‘In that case, we go up through these apartments, and then we go across the gallery and into the rooms on the other side. We can lock the door behind us,’ the Tattooist said looking pointedly at Cam. ‘It’ll buy us a few minutes, but the door at the base of the stairs is open. They’ll find their way in sooner or later, but we should have enough time to get to the Ring. It’s only a few rooms further on.’

‘You really want us to run across that hallway?’ Cam asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t mean to sound awkward, but there are a hundred zombies out there.’

‘Well that’s not my fault, is it?’ the Tattooist hissed.

‘That place must look like a house party in Hell right now, and you want us to walk through it?’ There was an edge of hysteria to Cam’s voice.

‘Aren’t you listening, you imbecile?’ the Tattooist snapped. ‘There’s no alternative. If we run into The Tower, they will eat us. If we wait here ... trust me, those things are patient. We’ll starve before they give in, and that’s assuming they don’t get in here.’

As if to prove the Tattooist’s point, the dead zombie disappeared from the window and another, this one with a hole the size of a teacup in the side of its face, took its place.

‘The Tattooist’s right,’ Dow said. ‘There’s no alternative. We’re going to have to fight our way to the Ring.’

‘Oh, that’s just peachy,’ Cam said glumly. He looked around and spotted his shotgun depressingly close to the snapping jaws of the zombie that was crawling through the window. He snatched it up and pumped a shell into the breach. Turning his head away, he pursed his lips, closed his eyes, and blasted the zombie point-blank in the head. A mist of corrupted brain matter splattered against his cheek and neck. None of it went into his eyes or mouth. When the ringing faded from his ears, he could hear the Tattooist bellowing with incoherent rage about stupid Elves with stupid weapons. Cam ignored the rant and scooped up his sword.

Dow and Grímnir already had the other door open. The Tattooist shoved his way past them, still muttering and throwing dirty looks at Cam. ‘I’ll lead,’ said the Ifrit as he stepped through the door. ‘I know the way.’

Samuel

TELL ME, SAMUEL AUTUMN, WHO ELSE IS YOUR WIFE CLOSE TO?

The question was so unexpected that for a moment, Sam didn’t notice the queasiness that rose in him whenever Cú Roí spoke.

‘Tabby, Master? She has a few friends, I suppose ...’

No, this will be somebody she has known for a long time. Somebody who is very close to her.

‘I don’t understand, Master ...’

It is not your place to understand. The words were leaden and disapproving, and Sam felt himself cower involuntarily in front of the tall, imposing creature.

‘I am sorry, Master,’ Sam said, lowering his eyes. ‘She was close to her parents, but they are dead. Then there is her brother, Rowan. She has always been very close to him.’

Rowan. Yes. Where can this Rowan be found?

‘He was at the house when I went for Tabby. I left him there.’

Then you must go and get him for me, Samuel Autumn. I would dearly like to speak with this Rowan. Take the girl with you. I see you have become attached.

‘Yes, Master,’ Sam said, his mind whirling. What on earth could the Master want with Rowan? He turned and hurried away in search of Annalise. He was going to need some new clothes, too – the ones Leach had given him stank.

ROWAN

‘A COUPLE OF SHAPED CHARGES WOULD WIDEN THAT ENTRANCE,’ SERGEI SAID. ‘Cause a bit of confusion: make sure there aren’t any ... things waiting for us in the shadows.’

Rowan looked at the gloomy, overgrown portal and thought the mercenary might have a point. Anything could be waiting in the darkness.

‘Not a chance,’ Mark said pensively. ‘Can you imagine what will happen if we blow up a building in Manchester City Centre? There’d be armed cops all over the place in seconds.’

‘That might not be a bad thing,’ Sergei commented. ‘They might get rid of

some of the bad guys.'

Rowan weighed up the options. 'No, he's right. Do you honestly think they're going to stop and ask us what's going on? Three men with automatic weapons stood next to a bomb site? Do you want to explain we're just blowing up a nest of inhuman monsters that have kidnapped my sister?' Rowan harrumphed sardonically. 'Even if they put us in straitjackets, it'd only be to make the double tap easier.'

'We do this as planned. Quick and hard. You've seen the blueprints and the heat signatures: whatever's living in this pile of shit is in the cellar. We go down, stick together, shoot anything that moves, and grab Tabitha. Understood?'

'This is madness,' Sergei said. 'We should put a proper team together and do it tactically ...'

'You've seen these things, Sergei. Do you remember what Samuel Autumn did in the hotel room? We could send in a small army, and they'd just get torn apart. No, this is the only chance we've got. A small contingent running fast, extreme prejudice, no mercy, and pray those bastards don't realise what's going on until it's too late.'

'Besides,' Rowan said grimly. 'I doubt Tabby's got enough time for us to be fucking around hiring mercenaries.'

'It's daytime. Everything we've seen so far points to these things being nocturnal. We might just catch them all asleep.' Mark slipped a clip into the L85A2 assault rifle that hung by a strap over his shoulder. The click of it slipping home was somehow reassuring.

'Do you honestly believe that?' Sergei asked doubtfully.

'Nope,' Mark said frankly. 'Right, let's go.'

It was still grey and cold, though the drizzle had stopped. Black clouds hung in the sky, and puddles laced the ground. Rowan adjusted the night vision goggles sat on the top of his head and followed Mark towards the entrance of the Mayfield Station.

Like Mark, Rowan had an L85A2, as well as two Browning pistols on a belt around his waist. Grenades hung like evil fruit from the webbing of his body armour. A small bag contained extra magazines of ammunition, a medical kit,

and some flares. Sergei and Mark had the same equipment, but Mark also had a black scabbard hung across his back. The matching black hilt extended up and over his shoulder.

They hurried in. The stench of piss and stagnant water assaulted Rowan's nose as they entered a large concrete room littered with debris and black puddles. Bird shit streaked some of the walls, and the sound of scuttling rats came to them sporadically from the darker corners. Light spilled in, grey and diffuse, from broken skylights. There was no other noise.

The room was the old station reception where the ticket offices had been. Low walls gave evidence of the booths, long ago removed. Arches ahead led out onto the train platforms. They glowed with ambient light, and Rowan could see high grass peeking up from the abandoned tracks.

The three men spread out and made their way towards the back room. It contained a narrow staircase that led down into the basement, where the furnaces had once been situated. As they made their way deeper into the building and the light faded away, Rowan slipped the goggles down over his eyes and flicked a switch. A low whine told him they were warming up, and then the darkness softened into a green glow. Black shapes appeared on a neon jade background.

Mayfield Station was deadly quiet except for their shallow breathing. Black blocks loomed up out of the fuzzy green world, eventually resolving themselves into old lockers or torn-up chairs, scarred desks and gaping cabinets. The floor was gritty and damp beneath their booted feet. Rowan kept the barrel of his gun pointed out in front of him, ready for the blur of an open-mouthed monster that never came.

Sweat trickled from beneath the headband that supported the heavy night vision equipment. Rowan ignored the irritation it caused as it dribbled down the side of his nose. Instead, he kept his attention on the narrow, empty corridors.

A towering shape flickered at the edge of his vision. Clawed hands spread wide and a barrel chest thrust forwards, below a shaggy elongated head. Waves of adrenaline shot through Rowan's system; fright and eagerness churned in his gut. An involuntary spasm caused the hard muscles in his stomach and arms to contract. His trigger finger tensed.

The monster suddenly became a mess of cleaning equipment propped up in a corner – the shaggy head a mop, the clawed arms abandoned vacuum hoses, and the barrel chest a bundle of rags and dusters, jammed haphazardly into the rest.

He gasped and quickly pulled his finger out of the guard. ‘Jesus,’ he whispered to himself.

‘What was that?’ Mark hissed.

‘Nothing,’ Rowan whispered back.

‘Keep quiet,’ Sergei said, the tension in his voice palpable. They moved on towards the staircase. Rowan reached it first and looked down. About fifteen steps dropped to a narrow landing. A dark space to the left indicated where the stairs continued downward. The corner was blind, and Rowan felt his hackles rise. Water dripped in a steady patter from the ceiling, into a puddle on the concrete. The walls were naked, crumbling brick. Other than the drip, there was no sound. The world was eerily bright through the goggles.

Mark gestured for him to go down and Rowan obeyed cautiously, one slippery step at a time. He took it slowly, testing his footing on each stair, keeping his assault rifle pointed ahead of him. When he got to the corner, he pushed his back up against the wall, took a deep breath, and then eased his head out. His quick glance took in the way ahead.

Mark leant in and they whispered to each other quickly. ‘Just another set of stairs down to another landing,’ Rowan said. ‘There’s nothing there.’

‘Keep going,’ Mark ordered. ‘There was no threat at this stage the first time I came down here, but still, be careful.’

They went down another two landings before they came to a doorway. The door itself was off its hinges, propped up against the wall to the doorway’s right. Once again, Rowan cautiously peered into the unknown and found a room, maybe fifteen feet squared, filled with the hulking forms of abandoned junk – machinery across one wall, and old, rusted pipes stacked up against another. Nests of cardboard boxes and filthy mattresses crowded another corner, and the floor was littered with empty bottles and cans, and thousands of used needles.

It smelled of shit, and Rowan almost gagged. Obviously, the homeless community had used this room as a place to stay until recently. Dark streaks

covered the floor around the makeshift bedding. Sergei moved over and knelt by one of the larger puddles. He dipped the tip of a finger in and rubbed the substance, then smelled it. 'Blood,' he whispered. 'Whoever was staying here ...' he trailed off. There was no need to finish the sentence.

There were three exits, including the one they had come in by. From the blueprints, Rowan knew the first led down a long corridor and ended in a small room. The second led into a large basement storage area, where the heat signatures had been strongest. They moved on through the room and over to the second exit.

He looked at his companions. They were suitably grim. Mark nodded at him and Rowan nodded back. Smoothly, they went through the second portal, Rowan first, then Mark, and finally Sergei. The malodour in here was even greater than the room before.

Through the goggles, Rowan saw a room so large that the far wall was lost in a green blur. The low ceiling was covered with leaking pipes; water dripped everywhere. A series of dark holes had been driven into the greasy floor in a rectangular pattern, four across the width of the room, the vertical lines marching away to be lost in the gloom. Rowan counted twenty before his goggles lost resolution to distance. Mark was already moving towards one of the pits near to the right-hand wall.

Rowan began to follow when he heard a low growl. He froze instinctively. The deep and menacing noise came from another pit, off to his left. Rowan edged over and looked in. A creature, dog-like but as big as a cow, lay at the bottom. A mastiff, perhaps? There was something wrong with it – its limbs were difficult to make out. It was as if they had been shredded. The way it lolled on the floor of the pit was wrong, too. It looked boneless: filleted.

It appeared to be asleep. It growled again as it rolled over and something cracked beneath it; Rowan saw slivers of bone littering the bottom of the hole. Something that looked a lot like a human head stared up at him with dead eyes. He pulled back sharply and his balance went. He turned quickly; his feet scuffed the floor, making a whisper of sound. The growl rumbled louder.

Rowan dropped the gun to thrust out his hands for balance. The strap over

his shoulder took the slack, and the gun's heavy stock swung sideways, rapping him in the hip. He bit his lip to stop himself swearing, still struggling to keep his equilibrium. Panic snickered at the back of Rowan's mind as he realised that he had turned a full circle. His back was now to the pit ... and he was losing his battle with gravity. Very slowly he began to topple in.

A hand caught him by the shoulder and dragged him back from the edge. Sergei looked at him, the Russian's face alien and insect-like beneath the AN/PVS-14. Then he leant and glanced over the edge.

'Scared of dogs?' he hissed condescendingly.

'There's a dead person in there,' Rowan hissed back.

Sergei shrugged. 'In Bosnia, entire families were fed to the dogs. Alive.' He shrugged again. 'This is nothing.' The Russian turned and stalked back over to where Mark was leaning over a pit. Tabby. Rowan hurried after him, eager to make sure his sister hadn't been hurt.

She cowered in one corner of the pit, refusing to look up at Mark's whispered pleas. Even through the green fog of the goggles, Rowan could see how haggard and dirty she was. 'Tabby,' he whispered. 'Tabby, it's me.'

'Rowan?' she asked in a normal voice, hope and disbelief in her tone.

'Shush, Tabby,' Rowan said desperately. 'Not so loud. I'm with some friends. We're going to get you out of here. Come over here. Follow my voice and put your hands up. We'll pull you out.' Tabby obeyed; she was in his arms in a matter of seconds. Rowan held her tight for a moment, hugging her and whispering reassurances into her ear. She was shaking badly, but she didn't cry or demand any explanations, and Rowan felt incredibly proud of her.

'It's time to go,' Mark said. There was something in his voice too, a catch, and Rowan turned to look at him questioningly.

Sergei interrupted. 'I don't think it's going to be as easy getting out as it was getting in.' Rowan turned and followed the Russian's gaze. A naked woman stood twenty feet away, her long hair tousled and wild, her heavy breasts heaving, and her fingers twitching spasmodically where they hung at her sides. Her eyes glowed star bright in the green wash of Rowan's world. He had no doubt that she could see them.

‘What’s going on?’ Tabby asked.

‘Quiet, Tabby,’ Rowan chastised. The woman did nothing but stare at them. The three men stared back. ‘What do we do?’

‘We move backwards, very slowly.’ Mark followed his own instructions and slipped a foot behind him. A snarl hummed across the stagnant air. Mark stopped. Rowan saw Sergei raise his rifle to his eye and take careful aim at the woman. ‘Go,’ he said. Rowan grabbed Tabby by the arm and pulled her towards the exit. The naked woman screeched and threw herself forwards. Sergei’s rifle kicked, and the report echoed deafeningly through the large room.

Wails and roars rose from every one of the pits, and huge forms began to writhe over the lips of the holes. ‘Run,’ Sergei shouted. He switched his rifle to full auto. Its thundering chatter chased Rowan and Tabby as they sprinted towards the door. They ran for the surface world, away from the dark and madness of the station.

Samuel

ANNALISE WENT DOWN WITH A BULLET IN HER HEAD. THE BACK OF HER SKULL mushroomed out in a shower of brain and bone. His night vision made the world grey and empty, devoid of colour and life, but Sam still knew what he had just seen.

Rage overwhelmed him, and he bounded towards the tall thin man who had fired. All his concentration settled on the great hook of a nose beneath the gunman’s night vision goggles. As he moved, Sam felt his body swelling, tearing, changing. The tall man swung his gun at Sam, but everything seemed to be in slow motion.

Sam’s foot hit the floor and a spasm of pain ran up his spine. He fell forwards reflexively and heard the mosquito zip of a high-velocity bullet

whipping past his head. His hands hit the floor to catch himself, and he felt natural on all fours. He pushed himself forwards with his hind legs and leapt towards the gunman.

Something hit him hard in the chest. Sam lost all his momentum and fell to the floor. Thunder filled the room with a medley of roars and screams as the Barghest woke. Sam shuddered as bullets cut into him. He opened his mouth to scream, and a howl ululated from his throat. There was another scream, this one human, and the stream of agony abruptly ended.

Sam lay there for a second, panting. He became aware of a deep burning sensation where each of the slugs had entered his body. Then, one by one, they faded and disappeared. Attempting to get to his feet, he found his limbs were twisted and strange. He managed to gain control and rolled onto all fours. He looked down at his fingers; they were long and clawed. Licking at his lips, he felt the elongated muzzle and razor teeth of the wolf inside him. He struggled to his hind feet, tottered precariously, and finally found his balance.

For a moment, Sam stopped to enjoy the power and vitality of his altered form. Then he turned baleful eyes to the tall man with the gun. He had been backed into a corner by two huge Barghest, their freakish limbs swaying hypnotically. It was his scream Sam had heard. Sam stalked towards him.

Leave him be, Samuel Autumn. The command cut through his head like a buzz saw. Sam groaned and ignored it, taking another step towards the gunman. Leach was in front of him, appearing from nowhere. Sam bared his teeth and lashed out at the smaller man. Leach slipped under his furry arm with fluid grace and slammed an open palm into Sam's chest.

The blow lifted Sam from his feet and sent him sprawling to the floor. Sam surged to all fours, ready to leap at Leach and rip him open.

Stop. The single word paralysed Sam, and he stood trembling. Another figure stepped in front of him. It was Annalise, her hair messed but otherwise intact.

'It's sweet, Sam,' she said. 'It truly is.' She patted the back of her head. Powder puffed up into the air where she touched: all that remained of her blood and brains. 'But obey the Master.' There was steel in her voice, and Sam slowly relaxed. Pain surged through him as his body shrunk back into its old shape. In

moments he was kneeling on the floor, aching, and except for the tattered remnants of his filthy clothes, naked.

The man with the gun had watched it all. Cú Roí walked past Sam, past the Barghest, and stood before him. Cú Roí spoke to him in his strange, empathic way, and Sam heard every word. *Sergei Constantine, I know your desires. And I can make them all come true.*

Camhlaidh

UPSTAIRS THERE WAS A SMALL, DUSTY ABATTOIR. CAM THOUGHT THAT MAYBE once it had served a purpose, but from the looks of things, the Tattooist had a vegetarian diet now. It made sense. The balcony would undoubtedly serve as a garden, and presumably there was some sort of dew collection device for water, but where could the Ifrit possibly get meat when he was stuck all the way down here?

Still, the tools of the butcher's trade were readily to hand, and the Tattooist scooped up a pair of meat cleavers as they passed through. They were big, ugly things, thought Cam – evil-looking, with long edges and scarred surfaces. Cam noticed they were made completely of metal, one dirty great lump of pitted iron forming the handle and the blade. He heard a howl from behind them and turned his attention to the door ahead.

They had run from the little sitting room, through some other storage areas, and then up a narrow, winding staircase. On the next floor they turned back on themselves, going through a few more abandoned rooms and then into the abattoir. The Tattooist led, and Cam ran on his heels, the shotgun pointed ahead of him, the muzzle weaving madly as he ran. Dow and Grímnir brought up the rear, a few feet behind them.

‘The entrance hall is ahead,’ the Tattooist called over his shoulder. ‘We go

straight across. Hopefully the Twisted will still be at the bottom of the stairs!’

Cam did not like the sound of the word ‘hopefully’, and his lips pursed, tense with worry. The Tattooist reached the door and wrenched it open. The portal slammed backwards, and the Tattooist was through. The noise of the ORCs howling grew louder: a thunderous cacophony.

Beyond the door was the wide upper gallery that Cam had seen when he first entered the Tattooist’s home. To his right was one of the stairways that led down towards the front door. The archway that led to the balcony was beneath him, and the huge stained-glass window was to his left. Facing him across the gallery was the other door. It was around eighty feet away, and the Tattooist was already running towards it.

Tightening his grip on the shotgun, Cam followed. He couldn’t help but glance to his right, over the balcony and down into the hallway. A roiling mass of ORCs fought each other to get through the door he’d left open. It was a seething, chaotic scene; the hallway was full of hundreds of screeching creatures that clawed and bit each other as they tried to push through the narrow gap. Those that had been pressed back to the bottom of the stairs by the mob saw him. They rushed up the stairs towards Cam, their eyes milky with cataracts, their hands rotted claws.

Without thinking, Cam aimed the shotgun down at the first one and pulled the trigger as he ran past. His aim was perfect; the thing’s scabrous head evaporated. The ORC to its right also staggered and fell, its left arm chopped off at the shoulder.

‘They know we’re up here!’ Cam shouted, the sound dull and muted through the ringing in his ears. The Tattooist was by the window. He stopped and looked back at Cam. There was a flicker of movement on the other side of the coloured glass, as if a huge spider was crawling across it. As Cam opened his mouth to call a warning, the glass exploded inwards and the dawn’s light flooded in. A hunched figure tumbled through with it. The Twisted arched and bucked like a falling cat, turning in mid-air and plummeting towards the Tattooist.

The shotgun boomed again, and the ORC was punched roughly sideways to land in a writhing, crippled mass of hissing fury at the Tattooist’s feet. The

Tattooist stamped on its head, his huge foot crushing its skull. It went still. Two more of the Twisted climbed through the window. The Tattooist stepped back towards Cam. The zombies were ahead of them, blocking their way forwards.

Cam glanced over his shoulder to see a throng of zombies nearing the top of the set of stairs behind him. There were more at the bottom of the other set of stairs. A lot more. They had seen Cam and the Tattooist and were running up towards them. They would reach the gallery and block the other door: in seconds, they would be overrun. Dow stepped out onto the gallery, and Cam could see Grímnir's huge form in the doorway behind him. It was clear that if Dow and Grímnir attempted the sprint to the other door, the approaching zombies would be on them. In moments, the gallery would become a surging gauntlet of the undead. Dow and Grímnir would certainly be surrounded. They had only been a few seconds behind, but it had made all the difference. Dow would die and be resurrected, a cannibalistic monster. Grímnir would be ripped to pieces, but he would regenerate. He would face an eternity as a living larder; a flesh cornucopia to the voracious swarm.

For the briefest instant, Cam and Dow looked at each other. Understanding passed between them and knowing that his friends' path led a different way to his own, Cam felt very lonely. Dow nodded at Cam stoically. Cam nodded back. Then, Dow stepped back through the door and shut it. Even over the howling, Cam fancied that he could hear the big deadbolts sliding home.

At least that door should hold the Twisted back, which was more than could be said for Cam and the Tattooist. Only a couple of seconds had passed since the window had been smashed through, but it felt like hours. They were exposed out here. They had to go on. There was no other choice.

Cam looked back at the monsters standing between him and safety. There were two Twisted on the gallery with them: the two that had come through the window. They hissed and gibbered. The ORCs running up the stairs were screeching.

First things first, Cam thought as he pumped the shotgun's breach. The two zombies stalked the Tattooist. Cam stepped up to the Ifrit's shoulder and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled it again stupidly, and again, and again.

With nothing else to do, he shook the Remington, as if that would fix it.

The Tattooist raised the meat cleavers, and Cam saw they were glowing white-hot. Then he tore into the two monsters, the superheated metal instantly cauterising the nasty wounds. The first went down, its face hacked into unrecognisable, charred mincemeat. It fell to the floor, shaking violently. The second one joined it a split-second later, its steaming neck a stump, its deformed head rolling towards its approaching brethren.

Ignoring the gruesome sight, Cam ran past the Tattooist and pushed the door open. They stumbled through it together and pushed it shut just as the first of the zombies reached the top of the stairs. It hooked clawed fingers through the gap and tried to push through the door. Cam put his shoulder to the sturdy wood and tried to force it closed. The Tattooist sent one white-hot blade slicing through the wriggling digits. The door slammed back into its frame, and the Tattooist dropped his cleavers and shot a series of heavy-duty bolts home. A steady thumping immediately began on the other side of the solid wood.

They looked at each other for a moment. ‘Dow and Grímnir?’

Cam shook his head. ‘They’re back on the other side. Cut off.’ The Tattooist’s flaming eyes were impossible to read as he stared at Cam. When the Ifrit picked up the scorching cleavers, Cam saw a heat haze washing off their surfaces. ‘Nice trick,’ he said.

‘I am a creature of fire,’ the Tattooist replied as if that explained everything. ‘Thank you – your toy saved my life,’ he said, nodding at the shotgun.

‘It nearly got us killed – stopped working ...’ Cam trailed off as he looked at the shotgun angrily.

‘Yes well, it helps if you reload it. Come, we have to get to the Ring. They’ll find their way around soon.’ The Tattooist stalked away along the narrow corridor. Cam cracked open the gun and stared with bemusement at the empty tube magazine. ‘Son of a bitch,’ he said quietly to himself over the thumping and howling that came from the door beside him.

ROWAN

ROWAN'S BURST OF AUTOMATIC FIRE HIT THE THING – A CRAZED, FREAKISH nightmare – square in what passed for its leg and punched it to the floor. It slid a couple of feet and then flipped back onto all fours. It hissed at Rowan.

Rowan pushed Tabby away from him and unleashed another volley at the monster. The thing absorbed the supersonic rounds like they were midge bites. It began to stalk towards them. They were at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the ground floor. 'Run,' he screamed at his sister.

'I can't see anything,' she screamed back. Rowan cursed and fired again.

The abomination was about the size of a pony and it stood on all fours, but that was where the resemblance ended. It was a flayed thing of weaving tentacles: a thing of madness that writhed and shifted in the darkness.

To Rowan, it looked like an oversized octopus with hundreds of limbs, every one tipped with a wicked-looking six-inch claw. Each of the slime-coated, sinewy tendrils pulsed slowly, the ends flicking this way and that like an angry cat's tail. They wrapped around each other to shape limbs and a corded, sleek body. Rowan imagined a bag full of worms, worked together to form a dead hyena's rotting carcass.

An eel-like trunk, about the diameter of a big man's body, was at the core of the mass of thick tentacles. At the end of this was a twisted caricature of a canine head. Its huge mouth, with a v-shaped jaw, was crammed with a mismatch of serrated teeth. Slime oozed from its gaping maw and ran down the thick muscular tube that seemed to be the creature's main body. It didn't have eyes, but that didn't stop the thing from facing in Rowan's direction; he was certain it could see him.

Rowan could not see its colour in the glow of the night glasses, but he knew instinctively the thing was the damp pink of an open wound. The creature roared again, a wet sound that rumbled menacingly in the darkness.

‘What’s going on?’ Tabby sobbed.

Rowan had nothing to tell her. He aimed the L85A2 at the abomination and prepared to die. Then Mark appeared behind it, gun gone, sword in his hands. He spun into the creature without hesitation, and the blade slashed into its side.

Rowan heard a wail as the blade bit. Finger-thick pieces fell to the floor where they flipped and jumped like landed fish. As the singing sword cut the monster, the tentacles that formed its mock body flared out in a Medusa’s halo. More of its pulsing, corded tendrils wormed around each other. The monster’s main head swivelled and arched to face Mark.

One of the four limbs lost its rigidity and snaked up with ophidian grace, coming apart into nine or ten barbed tentacles that shot out to entangle Mark. Rowan saw two of them slam into him, impaling him, his body armour useless against the onslaught. Mark screamed and brought the sword down again, slamming it into the gaping mouth of the monster.

‘Run,’ he croaked. ‘Run!’ Rowan grabbed Tabby and ran, scrambling up the stairs, pushing the awful scene from his mind.

MARK

SHARP-TIPPED TENTACLES WRITHED IN HIS TORSO. MARK FELT THEM TEARING into his organs, ripping them up within his ribcage and gut. It was excruciating. The thing smelled like bleach and sulphur, a pungent acid stench that made his eyes water.

Entangling limbs held him tight, and slime burned cold on his flesh. He struggled while the spikes inside his body did their vicious work. He managed to pull his sword arm free and swung it down hard, slicing some of the snake-like appendages away, freeing his other arm.

The black sword sang its song of death, and the monster recoiled from the attack and roared its strange, gurgling roar. Before it could strike again, Mark

pulled a grenade from his armour and yanked the pin out. The thing darted in towards him, its massive jaw open, to clamp around his body while its strange trunk coiled out to totally engulf him. Mark thrust the hand holding the grenade deep into the open mouth. The monster bit down reflexively, and Mark bellowed as his arm was severed just above the elbow.

Tentacles slipped almost lovingly around him and pulled him in towards its oozing maw. Mark counted ... one ... two ... three. 'Fuck you,' he hissed through the agony. Then the world exploded in a flash of white, made a thousand times brighter by the night vision goggles.

Flame and shrapnel tore the monster to pieces and rushed out to catch Mark in a wave of heat, lifting him and tumbling his seared and shredded body up and over. The remains of the creature splattered him, raining down, covering the room in sticky, acrid viscera. Mark landed hard on the exposed bone of his injured arm and groaned. He couldn't hear anything; he knew his eardrums had been ruptured. The goggles were useless, battered and burned. The optics flashed away to nothingness.

He pulled himself unsteadily to his feet and threw the goggles to one side. Reaching down, he searched frantically for the black sword and suppressed a sigh of relief when his questing fingers found its cloth-wrapped hilt. His flesh was already knitting itself back together as he staggered towards where he hoped the stairwell was, the black sword pushed out in front of him like a cane.

For a few terrifying moments he felt only blank wall, then he found the door and stumbled out, tripping almost immediately over the bottom step. He fell awkwardly and dropped the sword again, thrusting out his hands to catch himself. One was missing, and he slipped sideways and banged his head against the sharp stone edge of a step.

Cursing, Mark pulled himself back to his feet. Gathering the sword and sheathing it, he began to make his slow way up the stairs. His missing hand was growing back quickly, the flesh stretching and morphing. It itched. With the other, he pulled free the jagged shards of metal that were being forced from his healing flesh. He felt the burns vanish like dirt wiped off a kitchen surface.

By the time he got outside, his body was intact, if filthy with the gore of the

eviscerated creature. His clothes were burned and ragged. He looked down at his hands; the new one was clean, the old one was smeared in soot and grime and blood. Mark walked out into the open and took a gulp of clean air. Fittingly, it was raining properly. The heavens had opened, and thick stinging drops hammered into the ground, clawing it to mud. Mark raised his face to the sky and enjoyed the cold rain as it scoured his face.

‘Mr. Jones!’ The shout came from his right, and Mark turned. Rowan stood next to the old Ford Escort, its battered bodywork hiding its perfectly maintained engine. Mark saw Tabitha’s head in the passenger seat. He smiled in relief and walked over. ‘Jesus,’ Rowan said. ‘What happened? I thought that thing had you. I saw it stab you.’

‘It missed,’ Mark said flatly. ‘Let’s get out of here. I’ll drive.’

He made to walk past Rowan, but the younger man reached out and grabbed his arm. Mark looked at his hand pointedly, but Rowan didn’t remove it. ‘What happened in there?’

‘I shoved a grenade down its throat,’ Mark said. He looked around. ‘Where’s Sergei?’

‘I don’t think he made it.’

Mark looked back towards the station. ‘If he’s not out in five, he’s not coming out.’

Five minutes later they both climbed into the car without a word. They drove in silence, each reliving their own private nightmare.

ROWAN

BY THE TIME THEY HAD ALL SHOWERED, RESTED, AND CHANGED IT WAS CLOSE TO midday. Rowan put on combats and a white t-shirt and went in search of Tabby.

She was still in the room a portly man called Jason had allocated her.

Tabby was barefoot in blue jeans and a black top. She stood staring out of one huge window at a wide green lawn, which ran for about three hundred feet to a line of conifers. The sky outside was heavily overcast, and a lashing rain was pouring from it. Tabby had not bothered to turn any lights on, and the big room was as grey and cold and somehow as desolate as the world beyond.

Moving over to her, Rowan placed a hand on his sister's shoulder, and she jumped. He hushed her and felt her relax, though she didn't turn around. They stood together, staring out into the rain for a few minutes. Rowan didn't know what to say; Tabby seemed so distant.

'What happened?' she asked eventually.

'I don't know,' Rowan answered.

'Sam ... he ... I just don't understand.'

'He's sick, Tabby. You didn't see those things down there. Sam has fallen into something he doesn't understand.'

'I still love him,' she whispered. 'Even after everything he's done. If he's sick, then he can get better. You can bring him back, can't you Rowan?'

Rowan hesitated, remembering Sam's severed head skittering along on tentacles. Tentacles like those had formed the body of the monster in the old station. 'I'll try, Tabby,' he said after a moment.

It was a moment too long. She began to weep. Rowan hugged her to him. 'Shush, Tabby, don't cry.'

'What do you expect me to do?' she asked, choking. 'My husband kidnapped me and threw me in a pit, and then ... had sex ... with another woman while I listened. The things he said ... I'm never going to get him back.'

'It's not Sam, Tabby. Sam's somewhere else. We'll get him back. If there is any way at all, we'll get him back.' They stayed like that for a while, Tabby folded up in Rowan's arms, watching the rain gather into puddles on the perfect lawn below the window. Eventually there was a knock at the open door and a polite cough. Rowan looked over his shoulder and saw the man, Jason, waiting with a look of embarrassment.

'Sorry to interrupt,' he said. 'Mr. Jones would like to see Tabitha.'

From the way Jason said it, Rowan knew that he was not part of the invitation. ‘We’ll be glad to see him,’ he said.

Jason hesitated, as if he were about to say something. Rowan smiled at him, knowing his titanium teeth were a menacing sight in the gloomy room, and Jason’s six-foot frame seemed to sag a little. ‘I’ll take you to his office.’

MARK

MARK SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, ABSENTLY WATCHING THE STOCK PRICES ON ONE OF his monitors. He was clean now, dressed in combat trousers, sturdy black Magnum boots, and a khaki t-shirt. His black sword was close to hand.

Jason appeared at his door and ushered Tabitha in. Mark stood, and a smile began to etch the thin line of his lips. Rowan walked in after her and he frowned. He had not wanted the soldier here for this.

‘Tabitha, Rowan, have all your needs been taken care of?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ Rowan said.

‘Please,’ Mark said, gesturing to a couple of seats opposite his desk, ‘sit down. Jason, would you be kind enough to leave us for a moment?’

‘Yes, Mr. Jones,’ Jason said. He left the room.

‘A good man: he helps facilitate certain interests I have.’

Tabitha stared out of the window behind Mark’s desk. She looked haggard and drawn, her pale skin almost translucent, her blue eyes wide and blank. Redness showed that she had been crying. Mark’s heart fluttered at the sight of her – all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and tell her she was safe. Rowan looked at her with concern. ‘Tabby?’ he asked.

‘I’m okay,’ she said with a flat voice. Rowan did not look convinced.

He turned back to Mark. ‘I have to thank you for helping to save my sister, Mr. Jones. Without you ...’ he let the sentence trail off, obviously unwilling to upset his sister any further by speculating on what might have happened to her.

Mark waved the thanks away. 'I have very good reason for wanting to help your sister, Rowan. No thanks are necessary.'

'Who are you?' Tabitha asked, her eyes flickering towards his. 'What do you know about my husband?'

Mark sighed. 'I am a hunter of these things. I have been hunting them for a long time. But the creatures we saw down in that cellar ... changelings, monsters ... I have not seen these before.'

'What about Sam?' Rowan asked.

Mark did not like the way the conversation was going. He had not brought Tabitha to his study to talk about her husband. 'You saw what happened to him at your house ...' Mark trailed off at the warning look Rowan shot at him.

Tabitha picked up on the words, though. 'What happened to him?'

'Nothing, Tabby. You saw what he was like back at Mum and Dad's; Mr. Jones just means that he was angry ... out of his mind, you know?'

Rowan looked at Mark for agreement. Mark avoided his eye. 'Mrs. Autumn,' he said, careful to be formal. 'Your husband has run afoul of creatures of darkness, evil things that kill and maim on a whim. I believe he is now one of those creatures. I am sorry, but your husband is no longer human. Maybe he never was.'

There was a long pause. Rowan seemed almost pleased that Mark had told his sister the truth. Finally, Tabitha looked at Mark. There was something in her eyes. 'You say you have knowledge of these things, Mr. Jones – that you are a hunter of them. How, exactly, do we bring Sam back?' Her expression broke Mark's usually impassive heart.

'These aren't like anything I've ever seen before ... I ...'

'Please, Mr. Jones,' Tabitha interrupted. 'Please be honest.'

Mark sighed. 'How do we bring him back? We don't.'

'Then what exactly is your interest in my husband, Mr. Jones? Why are you so eager to help me?' Mark didn't speak; he just looked her flatly in the eyes. 'I see,' she said. Then, wordlessly, she stood up and walked out.

Rowan rose to go after her but hesitated. When she had left the room, he turned to Mark. 'I know it needed to be said, but it could have waited another

day or two.’ Then he left as well.

Mark sank back into his chair and sighed. He wished he could have waited; he wished Tabitha could have had some time to get used to what was going on, but he didn’t have a day or two. In fact, he knew that short of a miracle, Tabitha would be dead by sunset tomorrow.

@amhlaidh

‘COULDN’T YOU PEOPLE HAVE INVESTED IN SOME BETTER LIGHTING?’ CAM ASKED as he looked around.

If an inanimate object could have a doppelgänger, then The Tower at Dusk was the doppelgänger of The Tower at Dawn. An exact replica in every way, The Tower at Dusk was its dark opposite.

Their names represented their most fundamental difference – the time of day that they eternally existed within. There were schools of thought that the two Towers were separate entities, existing in different places, but the most prevalent belief was that they were the same place, stuck in an odd temporal warp that nobody really understood.

Whether The Tower at Dusk existed in the period before or after The Tower at Dawn had never been ascertained. One thing the denizens of the two Towers knew all too well was that the slip in time made a difference: The Tower at Dusk lacked sunlight, and therefore, vegetation. It was also warmer than The Tower at Dawn, having captured the heat of the full day. Its inhabitants had stamped their mark on their home as well, and it was this that first struck Cam after they had escaped The Tower at Dawn.

After running from the Twisted, Cam and the Tattooist had made their way to a room containing a Fairy-Ring. The room was small and windowless, its corners lost in shadow, its ceiling hidden in gloom. Faint light came from the

Fairy-Ring, which was comprised of a circle of metal candles, each one six inches high with a ghostly white flame hovering above it. Cam had noted with disquiet that at least a third of the flames had gone out.

They made the passage around the Ring regardless; nine circuits in the bitter dark, only the candles' flames to guide them. Step by careful step, always tensed for the tremor that would throw them out into the void, they eventually made it through.

Then the cold had gripped Cam, and he wrapped his arms around his chest. 'Jesus Christ,' he shouted above a howling wind. Snow crunched underfoot. Around him, a vast plain of white stretched away beneath a driving storm of sleet. The sky above looked no different, and Cam experienced the strange sensation of being stuck in a pale, stinging box.

They stood in the centre of a circle of massive, weather-worn boulders. The Tattooist – eyes spitting and flaring, melting the sleet before it got to his face – walked quickly over to one of the boulders and began to trudge through the knee-high snow. Cam followed, his teeth chattering. Soon darkness encroached once more, and the freezing cold of the wilderness was replaced by the simply numbing cold of the void.

'Where was that?' Cam asked.

'Bouvet Island,' the Tattooist replied, his voice distorted as if coming from underwater. 'It's a small island in the South Atlantic Ocean. It belongs to Norway. It just happens to be where the Ring comes out on Earth. Keep going – we need to make the next transition quickly. The tremors ...'

'Right. Bouvet Island. It was cold is what it was,' Cam noted. The Tattooist didn't bother answering. They continued to walk around the Ring, following the spots of light that mapped its circumference. Again, they managed to pass without incident, and Cam said a silent prayer of thanks when they finally stepped out into The Tower at Dusk.

The room they emerged into, Cam was soon to find, was quite typical of the rest of The Tower at Dusk. Rush torches flamed and sputtered in regular intervals along the walls; thick tar covered the brickwork above each one, stretching up to coat the ceiling with a viscous black slime that dripped down in

occasional coagulated globs; and the floor was sticky and unpleasant to walk on. Just like the Green Man pub, Cam thought.

Although architecturally identical to The Tower at Dawn, it couldn't have had a more different atmosphere. Where The Tower at Dawn seemed a sad, austere place of polished stone and swollen light, this was an infinitely more vibrant place. The air was not dry and dusty; it was hot and thick with humidity and smoke. The place felt lived in, crammed with life and sluggish vitality.

Around the centre of the room flickered a series of candles, identical to the ones in The Tower at Dawn. On one wall were a couple of pegs with black robes hanging on them. The Tattooist walked over to them. He threw one at Cam, and the Elf struggled into it.

The two made their way back to the apartments' entrance hall. It was strange for Cam to walk into this place, familiar and yet so different. For a start, the remnants of a zombie apocalypse weren't waiting for them with faceless grins. That was the only good thing.

Flesh crawling, Cam looked around at the Tattooist's entrance hall in The Tower at Dusk. Soft, flickering flames did nothing to light the huge room. The staircase was bathed in shadow, the windows were black and dead, and the arch leading out onto the balcony leaked a heavy midnight-blue glow that promised to suck you into its depths forever. More spots of tar, black and liquid like freshly spilled blood, covered the floor. The ceiling was lost in the gloom, and the walls were fouled with more of the smoky sludge. The treacherous lighting had prompted Cam's question. The Tattooist ignored him, so he asked again.

'What's with the crap lighting? It's straight out of a Hammer Horror.'

'The Svartálfar prefer it; the shadows give them places to hide,' the Tattooist answered.

Cam looked around nervously. He shuddered with the sensation of being watched by unseen eyes. 'Svartálfar ... God. I thought they'd died out.'

'They are as alive as you or me. Come now, we must get to the top of The Tower.'

Cam hesitated, confused. 'Aren't we going down – to find the Maiden?'

'Things have changed. We have no idea where she is, and without Grímnir

we have no chance. The magic of the tattoos gifts him the ability to sense when those of the Courts are near him. Without Grímnir there is no future. We have to go back and bring him out. But we cannot go back the way we came, so we must push on.'

The thought of going back into the depths of The Tower at Dawn made Cam feel sick with fear. He hid it. Grímnir was his friend after all, and Dow hadn't been that bad. Pushing the reloaded shotgun under his robes so it was out of sight, Cam nodded at the Tattooist. The creature's eyes flickered in what Cam suspected might have been amusement, but he said nothing. Instead, the massive Ifrit walked to the main doorway.

'Try and hide your face in the hood,' the Tattooist said. Grumbling, Cam pulled the heavy material further over his forehead. The cloth was coarse and itchy, and the already stifling atmosphere was unbearable under its weight.

All he could see were his feet, his trainers popping out from beneath the hem of the robe every time he took a step. 'If anybody realises you are an Elf,' the Tattooist said, 'they will kill you. Do you understand?' Cam wordlessly pulled the hood further down his face. He heard the huge door open, and they stepped out onto the bridge.

Unable to see anything but down, Cam concentrated on making his unsteady way across the ridiculously narrow space. Unlike The Tower at Dawn, the depths did not have a faint glow. It was a dark, dead space, and he couldn't see farther than the weak penumbra of the infernal torches, mounted haphazardly on the walls either side of the span. In a way, he was grateful.

Soon they were walking through more smoky corridors. Occasionally they came across a quiet Ifrit, making his way here or there on some unknown errand. Sometimes these apparitions spoke to the Tattooist in the True Tongue, a simple greeting in passing. Nobody looked twice at Cam.

The hours-long journey in The Tower at Dawn took considerably less in The Tower at Dusk. For a start, they didn't need to move cautiously for fear of being eaten by an enraged horde of slaving monsters. Secondly, the Tattooist seemed to know the twisting corridors like the back of his hand. Cam went along meekly, following the Tattooist's flapping sandals as he strode ever onward.

Corridors got busier the farther up they travelled. More Ifrit populated these levels. Knots of them spoke in low voices, their eyes casting flaming pools onto the floor as Cam passed.

Without warning, Cam stepped onto fine sand. They were outside, under natural, almost purple light, and breathing cleaner air. He followed the Tattooist for a few more feet before he stopped.

‘I think you can put your hood back now. Nobody comes out into the desert.’ Cam pushed it off gratefully and took a great gulp of sterile air. His surroundings seeped into his consciousness, and he gaped stupidly.

The roof of The Tower at Dusk was a desert, with no gardens, no trees, no flowers nor streams nor animals. A great expanse of sand stretched out under the half-light of the dark sky. The strange haze made distance difficult to comprehend. The lack of landmarks and the twisted light of a just-set sun turned the top of The Tower into a landscape of hollow shadow and washed out purple, like a forgotten moonscape.

‘Where are the gardens?’

‘There is no sun. There can be no life. Besides, the Unseelie Court prefers it like this. Come.’

Wordlessly, Cam looked back. Behind him, the turret stood forlornly in a sea of sand like a single broken tooth, rotting in a black mouth. Behind it, the sky was a promise of madness.

Nothing had ever spoken to him like that sky spoke to him. It was a gash in the dying evening, as if somebody had rammed a cold knife into blackened skin and dragged it down. Ethereal fog, spider web bright, spilled from the dark contusion in a tangle of hazy smears.

The clouds around it were steel feathered emptiness, lost nothingness. The rest of the sky was dark; only the vicious wound over the turret hinted at where the sun had died. Glowing a soft indigo on the edge of touch and reason, it was a boiling mess of vaporous ruin; a slit, leaking wispy ichor from God’s belly, or perhaps a malevolent, blinded eye. He felt like reaching into the maelstrom and grabbing something, pulling it out, dragging it through the gases that slewed slowly from the chasm in the dead twilight.

Scared by the way that awful, broken sky made him feel, Cam turned away from it. Seeing that the Tattooist was quite a way ahead of him, he started to run. No wonder the denizens of the Unseelie Court were all so bat-shit crazy, he thought to himself as he caught up with the big Ifrit. He was still reeling from the grandeur of the tortured dusk when he saw movement ahead. Somebody was walking towards the turret. Whoever it was would pass less than a hundred feet away from them.

‘Your hood,’ hissed the Tattooist. Cam pulled it over his head, but figuring the twilight and distance would hide his features, he left it up enough to see the newcomer.

Whoever it was trudged slowly from the direction of the Fairy-Ring. Cam watched, wondering if this was one of the dreaded Svartálfar. It didn’t look like one, but then he didn’t really know what they were supposed to look like. As the figure got closer, he frowned in consternation: Something was very familiar about ...

Cam gasped as he saw the face of the person strolling through the desert. Then he ducked his head, lest he was also recognised. Once the figure had passed, he stopped. The Tattooist stopped with him.

‘What?’ he asked impatiently with flaring eyes.

‘I think we’re in a lot of trouble,’ he said faintly.

MARK

AFTER THE GUARDS TOOK HIM INTO CUSTODY, MARCUS BECAME CATATONIC. HIS father visited him, but Marcus refused to speak; he just stared vacantly into space. A physician came and Marcus sat, unresisting, as he tried to bleed him. Eventually he left, his scalpel unable to open his skin for more than a few seconds before it healed. The word ‘witchcraft’ was said more than once, though Marcus barely heard it.

Only when his father tried to send him back to Rome did Marcus become animated. He fought the guards who tried to put him in the coach, shouting that he had to stay, that she would be born here, and that he had to be here to save her. His ranting earned him a spell strapped securely to his bed. They didn't take him back to Rome though; Marcus later learned that his father was unwilling to let society know his son was a psychotic murderer, and even had his name removed from the family rolls.

Not that Marcus cared. He returned to catatonia, not sleeping, not eating; he gradually got thinner and thinner. Yet he did not die. Abandoned in his room in the Mamucium fort, a living skeleton, his only company was the old caretaker who looked in on him twice a day to see if there was any change. Occasionally his father visited, but not often.

It was a waking nightmare he could not break from. He sat and stared, but behind his eyes the same things went around and around in his head. He would see himself kill Octavius, kill Annaea, and he would run to the oak and hang himself. Then the Maiden would come to him, and every time his hatred swelled.

'You will live forever, Marcus,' the Maiden of Earth and Water had told him. 'You will live, but so shall Annaea. You will never know when she is born, or what she will look like, but she will be reborn within fifty miles of this spot. She could be any age when she dies, but she will die on every fiftieth anniversary of this day. I know it seems cruel to you, but it is necessary. Without purpose, the years would sear your mortal soul away in insanity. You must live for her, Marcus. You must span the centuries for her, and for me. If you can save her, Marcus, then the spell will be broken.' She had smiled. 'If you can save her.'

So it had gone. Eventually, Marcus returned to the world, began to eat again, drink again ... but not to live again. His only purpose was to break the curse upon him. Every fifty years for two millennia Marcus struggled to save his Love, and each time that he failed another small part of his humanity slipped away. He still loved her, but now all he hoped for was to give her a chance at living.

He had seen her die at twelve and at twenty, at thirty and at forty-five. She had been kicked by a horse, drowned in the river, raped and murdered by soldiers, beaten to death by her husband, tripped and banged her head, been hit

by cars and lorries, and once even a train. Her deaths had been quick, and they had been slow, but every one had been violent, and every time Mark had failed to protect her.

Sometimes he never found her. Sometimes he was only moments away from saving her. Once, in the late nineteenth century, he had seen her gunned down by a burglar right in front of him. In that cycle, he got close to her from a young age, wooed her, married her, and vowed not to let anything happen to her. On the day of her death, he told her they would stay at home. Dismissing the servants, he made Annaea promise to remain in their bedroom while he waited at the bottom of the stairs, sword drawn, face grim.

Her scream made him run to her. He burst into the room just in time to see a pimply youth pull the trigger of a dirty, old flintlock pistol. The killer ran – jumped through the window with a face white with terror, while Mark cradled his dead wife in his arms. The pain of that cycle had been incredible because they loved again for a few short years. After that, he vowed never to get close to Annaea again.

It could be argued, he supposed, that in a way he was blessed – he could spend time with her every cycle, and in the long run it would add up to a lifetime or more. Mark knew it did not work like that. The pain of her passing was so terrible, that it was easier to distance himself from her, watch her, and live vicariously through her. Maybe he was a coward, but he no longer cared. All he wanted was to break the spell and die, so that she might finally live.

Torturous year followed torturous year. Whenever Annaea was murdered, Mark dedicated himself to tracking the killers and bringing justice down upon them in terror and violence. Sometimes he managed it; it did not help. He became adept at hunting men, and soon turned his skill and wrath towards the fairy folk who had cursed him.

He never found the Maiden of Earth and Water, but he found others. Tall creatures with beautiful features and pointed ears, dark men with flames for eyes and a penchant for human flesh, giants with incredible strength, and insubstantial wraiths that vanished into the shadows at will. He learned to kill all of them. He stalked them, watched for their weaknesses, and then turned his curse against

them.

Revenge was empty, though. He saw Rome fall and realised the truth in the Maiden's words. Humbled before the steady advance of time, he watched the area that bound him to Annaea's resurrections grow into a thriving industrial town and then a major city. His immortality held no joy; every fifty years he watched again as Annaea died in blood and pain.

That day was tomorrow. This time he would not let Annaea die. He would not let Tabitha die. Standing up, he decided to find his reincarnated wife and her brother and tell them everything. Maybe he could convince them of the truth.

Maybe he could save her if she knew. It was a desperate hope, especially with the strange new monsters arrayed against them – Tabitha's husband included – who seemed to desire her death. It was worth a try. He still loved Annaea ... Tabitha ... with all his heart. He saw the woman he cared for in her eyes, and it wrenched his soul to be so close to her and not be able to hold her.

If he could save her, then she could live; on the one hand, he wanted that more than anything. On the other hand ... well, he was tired. He could not live for another fifty years. He needed to rest. He needed to die. Saving her would see the magic end, and Mark would finally be at peace.

'Mr. Jones,' said Jason from the door.

Mark's eyes snapped up. 'What is it, Jason?'

'Sergei ... he's back!'

Samuel

'I GUESS THE MASTER WILL HAVE TO RETHINK HIS GAME PLAN NOW, HUH?' SAM asked Leach. The other man stared at him with those blank, bulbous eyes and then turned his attention back to the big house.

They were sat together in a car, and Sam could smell a greasy, fishy tang

coming off Leach. Sam continued to speak, unperturbed by either his companion's stoicism or smell. 'I mean, he's put all his money on those weird Barghest things, and one of them ends up dead in the first skirmish. They may have been nigh on invincible back in the day against clubs and spears and shit, but it doesn't look too good when you bring high explosives into the equation.' Sam sniggered. 'I mean, they've got fucking rocket launchers now. How do you think one of those freaky bastards would do against a bazooka? Or a tank, for that matter?' Sam began to laugh. Leach ignored him.

Cú Roí was furious when he found out one of the Barghest had been killed by the men who came for Tabby. It was the first time Sam had seen the creature truly angry, and the display frightened him. Cú Roí's face had twisted up; his features seemed to elongate, his pointed teeth grew in his jaw, his skin became mottled and creased. His eyes shone white, and his hair stood up on end as wild energies fizzled through it. He roared, and the noise was awful. The Barghest cowered at his feet, and Sam bowed his head.

The human, Sergei, shit his pants. Even though he couldn't see what was going on, he began to cry after fouling himself. For a moment, Sam thought Cú Roí was going to kill them all in a fit of madness. Then he calmed and questioned the man, Sergei. The human told the Master everything. He was pathetically eager to please. Cú Roí barked some orders and disappeared deep into the bowels of the Mayfield Station. The human stood nervously with Sam and Leach. Without the goggles disguising his face, Sam recognised him from the Hilton Hotel incident.

Back in the present, Sam stretched in his seat and continued with his soliloquy. 'I remember what he said to me – we're easy to produce but we're ... what was it? Oh yes, "fickle and untrue". But the Barghest – oh, the Barghest are fucking super weapons. "With a thousand, I will rule the world."' Sam adopted a deep echoing voice, trying to mimic Cú Roí's telepathy.

'Do you remember that? Even you can fail him, apparently. Well, he'll definitely have to rethink things now. I don't think I could be killed by a tank. I was decapitated, after all. I think me and you are going to have a big role in the new order. Women, money, cars, houses, slaves, dungeons ...' Sam laughed

again. ‘Me and you, buddy,’ he said and gave Leach a friendly punch in the arm. Leach turned that baleful stare on him again. ‘Best mates,’ Sam said with a smile.

After Cú Roí left them, in what Sam liked to think of as a huff, they had begun to follow their orders. Annalise was sent out to capture more women for the birthing pits – not an easy task at two o’clock in the afternoon, but she seemed quietly confident. Sam and Leach went to steal a nondescript car – in this case a blue Honda Accord – and then headed over to the address Sergei had told them about. Sergei, still stinking of shit, came with them. When they reached the address, he went in. That was ten minutes ago.

Once Sergei understood that immortality was the carrot, and being eaten alive was the stick, he had become quite cheerful about betraying his companions. Sam suspected the reward would have been enough – that the threat was offered more for form’s sake than anything else. Sergei struck him as the sort of man who would revel in the power Sam currently enjoyed – the sort of man who would do anything to obtain it.

Eager to tell the Master about Mark Jones, Sergei waxed lyrical about Jones’s obsession with Sam’s wife. Apparently, this weirdo had been stalking Tabby for God alone knew how long. He brought in the mercenary about six months ago to keep an eye on her. He had this insane idea that Tabby was going to die tomorrow and wanted to protect her.

A small part of Sam’s mind fought within him, screaming that maybe it was him who would kill her, and that it wasn’t right. That he loved Tabby. Sam had no trouble ignoring it.

It still rankled that Jones had been watching his wife. He felt anger rise in him as he listened to Sergei speak. The mercenary told Cú Roí about what had happened over the last few days. He sounded nervous as he described the events in the Hilton Hotel, the tracking of Sam, the finding of Rowan, and the raid on the station. After he finished, Cú Roí stared at him for a moment, and then he smiled.

Now, Sam stared moodily at the house. The plan was simple, but he hated waiting out here. Something occurred to him. ‘Hey, Leach, do you change shape

as well? I bet you do. What do you turn into? A rabbit? A goldfish?' Leach didn't even look at him. 'Hey, take it easy, big guy! I'm just playing with you!

'You know what we're like? Visionaries. Do you remember that cartoon from when we were kids? Blokes in armour with holograms in them? They could turn into animals too. Do you remember? Were you ever a kid? We're like them though, aren't we?' Leach didn't deign to reply. After a moment, Sam sighed. 'Yeah, I suppose you're right – we don't have those cool holograms, do we?'

Not that it mattered, Sam thought. He could feel the monster inside him straining to get out. 'God this is boring,' Sam said with a yawn. 'Where is that Russian prick? Still, it'll be worth the wait when we get in there, won't it buddy?' He gave Leach another slap on the arm and again, two dead, bulbous eyes fastened on him. Sam stared back at him hungrily. If he could have seen himself, he might have been pleased to see that his jaw had elongated into a lupine sneer.

ROWAN

SERGEI LOOKED – AND SMELLED – LIKE SHIT. ROWAN STARED AT THE dishevelled mercenary suspiciously. 'How did you get out?' he asked.

'They caught me ... they were going to kill me. I ... fouled myself,' he said, looking deeply ashamed. Then he rallied and looked back at them. 'Something happened. There was an explosion. One of those things with the tentacles got killed. The others went crazy – the Autumn boy and the naked girl ran off to look, and I ran into the station and hid. Once things had quietened down, I slipped out. Lost my goggles somewhere when I was running. I've never been so scared – I kept expecting one of those things to drop on my shoulders and tear

my head off. But I got out, stole a car, made my way here.'

'Where's the car?' Mark demanded.

Sergei looked angry, some of his old fire returning. 'I dumped it about ten minutes' walk from here and made my way on foot. I didn't want to leave them any pointers,' he snapped.

'Good. Did you learn anything in there?'

'Only that the Autumn boy's some kind of shape-shifter. When he thought the naked piece was done for, he turned into a horrible, great big furry motherfucker, seven feet tall at least. I shot the bitch in the head,' he said with grim pride. Then his shoulders slumped. 'Didn't stop her, though: she got right back up again.'

Rowan glanced at Tabby to see how she was handling the news that her husband was even more monstrous than they previously thought. She was pale and her mouth was set in a narrow line, but she seemed calm enough.

Mark stepped forwards and slapped Sergei on the shoulder. 'I saw that shot – it was a good one. I'm glad you made it out, my friend. We need all the help we can get. Go and clean yourself up. Get some rest. We'll talk later.'

Sergei walked from the room, and Rowan watched him go. 'Do you trust him?'

Mark hesitated. 'He's a mercenary – he works for the highest bidder. But what can those stinking animals possibly offer him that I can't? Besides, if he's lying, then I fear the damage is already done.' For a second it looked like he was going to say something else to them, then he turned away. 'Keep your weapons handy, just in case.'

'What next?' Tabby asked.

Mark turned to Jason who had stood by silently, listening to the exchange. 'Jason, I need you to find out everything you can about shape-shifters – myths, legends, anything – but find me their weaknesses.'

'I'll have to go back to my office.'

'Then do it. Let me know when you have something. We'll come up with a plan then.' He turned and walked out. After a brief shrug in their direction, Jason followed.

‘That’s it?’ she asked Rowan.

‘Well, I don’t have any ideas either. Give him some time; he seems to be resourceful enough. Come on, I’m going to teach you how to use a gun.’

‘You think that it’ll help?’

‘Who knows ... but it’ll make me feel a damn sight better.’

They made their way to the garage where Mark stored his weapons. Rowan quietly and competently showed Tabby how to use a handgun, an assault rifle, and hand grenades. His initial intention wasn’t to go over the principles of the hand grenades with her. They were much too dangerous and unpredictable. Then he remembered the only thing that had proven even vaguely effective was a damned great big explosion. With that in mind, it didn’t seem such a bad idea after all.

Mark found them there a couple of hours later. ‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Teaching little sis how to shoot,’ he said with an affectionate smile at his sister. When he looked back, there was something in Mark’s expression; it was gone before he could work out what it was.

‘Nothing that’s going to hurt her, I hope?’ Mark said, looking pointedly at the grenades.

‘They’re the only weapon that seem capable of stopping those things ... What else would you recommend?’

Mark didn’t answer. Instead, he turned to Tabitha. ‘So, what has your brother suggested?’ he asked.

‘Shoot them in the head, then toss a grenade at them while they’re down,’ she replied matter-of-factly. Mark nodded approvingly and smiled the faintest of smiles.

He opened his mouth to say something more, but another voice cut over him. ‘You humans and your guns.’ It was a laconic, sarcastic drawl that Rowan recognised instantly. He turned and snatched up an assault rifle.

Sam and another man stood at the door that led from the garage to the main house. Sam’s companion was of medium height and of an indeterminable age. His frame was so thin and scrawny, Rowan thought he could probably break him

with one hand. The man's head was far too big for his body; his wide, unblinking eyes were pale and bulbous and devoid of any life. His hair was fine and as white as his sickly skin, to which the dew of desiccation clung; it seemed only a step away from rotting off his skinny carcass. He wore a frayed and filthy suit that might have once been blue.

Rowan fired a couple of shots into the pale man. He spun to the floor and lay still. Sam laughed and his voice deepened, his form shifting slightly, bulging in places it shouldn't bulge. He leapt forwards impossibly fast and cannoned an arm into Rowan's ribs with terrible force. Rowan flew to land in a dazed and winded heap on the bonnet of the silver DB7. The gun spun from his hand.

Vaguely, through the fugue of blood pounding in his head, Rowan saw Sam approach Tabby. His sister pointed a Browning Hi-Power at Sam's head.

Sam laughed. 'What are you going to do with that, dear?' He walked up until the muzzle was pressed firmly into his forehead. 'Don't you remember our vows? To love and to cherish, till death do us part,' he sneered. 'You haven't got the ...'

A fountain of blood and brains surged from the back of Sam's head, instantly turning to red dust. The gun's report slammed through the confined space. Tabby staggered backwards from the recoil as Sam slipped flaccidly to the floor. 'Fuckin' A!' Rowan managed to whisper as his breath returned.

He slumped from the bonnet and looked around to see what was going on. The pale man in the cheap suit was back up. He had Mark pinned, face down, over the bonnet of a Lamborghini and seemed to be biting at the back of his neck. No matter how Mark struggled, he couldn't shrug the pale man off. Rowan couldn't help; he turned to look for Tabby.

Gun clutched firmly in her hand, she stared down at Sam's writhing body with disgust and fear. Tendrils snaked their way from the two holes in his head – one front, one back – as the raw wounds healed. Rowan watched determination set over Tabby's features. She picked up one of the grenades.

Panic washed through him, brushing aside the last cobwebs in his head. 'Tabby, no!' he called. She stared at him, confused. 'Not in here,' he shouted in alarm. 'It'll kill us all!'

She dropped it like it was poisonous. Rowan ran forwards and grabbed Tabby by the arm. ‘Come on,’ he shouted, pushing her towards the DB7. Something heavy landed on his shoulder. Terrible strength spun him around, and he came face-to-face with Sam, his face twisted somewhere between animal and man.

His yellow eyes glared malevolently, and his teeth were too long in a wide, sloping jaw. Rowan did the only thing he could: he let go of Tabby and punched Sam hard in the face ... snout ... whatever. If it was possible, the half-man smiled.

When Rowan came to, he was lying on the floor near the Harley Davidson. Sam was struggling with Tabby near the Lamborghini, and Leach was pulling an unconscious Mark towards the door. Rowan felt like a freight train had trundled over him. His neck and back felt like he had the onset of whiplash.

He struggled to his feet; Sam turned and looked at him. ‘You’re next, brother dearest,’ he said, his voice slurred by his malformed jaw. He looked less like a man now than ever. Leach dropped Mark’s unconscious body and began to open the garage door.

Rowan made a snap decision. If he stayed, he would die; to rescue Tabby, he needed to live. He jumped on the Harley Davidson – the keys were in the ignition – and gunned the motorcycle towards the open door. The last thing he heard before he burst out into the grey December drizzle was Tabby screaming for him not to leave her. Shame wound its cold fingers around his soul as he concentrated on his escape.

©amhlaidh

IT HAD BEEN NERVE-RACKING TO FOLLOW THE FIGURE BACK ACROSS THE DESERT to the turret that jutted up from The Tower at Dusk, and then up through its

mezzanine levels. Cam felt that he stuck out like a sore, elfin thumb. Their quarry never looked back, apparently preoccupied with something, and Cam and the Tattooists' less-than-stealthy creeping went unnoticed.

The upper levels were dark. Where before sputtering torches had lined the wall every three feet or so, here they were spread thin, leaving puddles of gloom to pass through. Every time he stepped into one of these deep shadows, Cam gritted his teeth. Stories of the Svartálfar came to him unbidden, and his flesh crawled. The last thing he wanted to do was step into one of those monsters.

Black, solid-looking doors marched along each side of the corridor, all firmly shut and brooding. Cam had no desire to see if any were unlocked; he skulked past each one with a suspicious look. The Tattooist didn't seem to notice them, nor did he hesitate when he walked into the pools of darkness. Cam glared at his back, hating the creature for its self-assurance.

Ahead, the figure turned a corner. The Tattooist edged up and poked his head around quickly. He pulled it back even quicker and slid back towards Cam along the wall. 'There are guards at the end of the corridor – two Ifrit. We won't get through that way. They're outside the door your man just went through. You'll have to find another way.'

'You mean, we'll have to find another way?'

'No, I mean you. I'll stay here in case he comes out before you find him. Better for one of us to follow him.'

Panic surged through Cam. The idea of being alone in the eerie turret frightened him. 'Don't you think it might be better to stay together? I've seen the movies: splitting up never ends well. I'll come back and just find a blood trail, and then I'll follow it and some oversized nut-bag will be wearing your face and hanging your entrails up for his Christmas decoration ... or I'll get lost and end up in an abattoir somewhere, and some naked guy will toss me your head ... or ...'

'Shut up,' the Tattooist hissed, his eyes flaring in rage. 'Grow up, Camhlaidh. You are a man, not a child to jump at shadows. Do you think I want to be here in this place with you? I can barely trust you to walk in a straight line. But I must rely on you to help me discover what that man is doing here. If I die in this, then

I die. That is a price I pay willingly for the welfare of my people.

‘But I will not die because you lose your nerve. It is time to prove to yourself that you are not some pathetic, spineless, whining child. Now go – if I am not here when you get back, I will meet you by the Fairy-Ring outside the turret at the top of The Tower.’

Cam stared at the Ifrit and felt hatred. How dare this thing question his bravery? He wasn’t a coward, but he wasn’t suicidal either. He wanted to tell the Tattooist where to go, but as he stared into his incandescent eyes, his will slowly wilted. As he trudged towards the nearest door, he felt angry and ashamed of himself for backing down so easily.

Reaching the door, he wrenched at the handle angrily. To his great surprise, it opened smoothly under his fingers.

Samuel

YOU HAVE DONE WELL, LEACH, AS HAVE YOU, SAMUEL AUTUMN. I AM PLEASED BY YOUR SUCCESS.

Sam felt relief. He had wondered how Cú Roí would take Rowan’s escape: apparently, quite well. Mark Jones and Tabby were lying at Cú Roí’s feet. Both were awake, and both were firmly tied and gagged. That Jones was conscious seemed to disturb Leach, because he kept prodding the prostrate man with his toe. Sam thought Leach’s habit of biting people on the neck was all a bit eighties – a throwback to *The Lost Boys* and in his opinion, a bit sad.

Both captives lay still, their eyes flickering around sightlessly in the darkness. Seeing in the dark – now that was cool, Sam thought to himself smugly.

Cú Roí walked over to them and gently touched their heads. Mark didn’t move, but Tabby wrenched her head away angrily. Cú Roí didn’t seem to notice

or to care.

The spell holding these two together has great potential. They are connected in a way that truly spans the vagaries of time. Do you remember, Samuel Autumn, when I asked you about those close to her? I felt the magic in her then, strong and wild. But I needed both halves to tap the power of the whole. I had thought that it must be the brother, but I was wrong. It is this man. They are soulmates. He looked at Sam with a smile on his gaunt features. Can you not feel their connection, Samuel Autumn? Can you not feel how these two were made for one another? Can you not feel the magic?

Hot, surly anger swelled up in Sam's stomach. That was his wife. This Jones guy was messing with his wife! He took a step towards him, murder on his mind. Cú Roí laid a gentle, long-fingered hand across his chest.

No, Samuel Autumn, they are mine now. Leach, take the man – I do not trust Samuel Autumn to be entirely gentle with him. Samuel Autumn, please take your wife and place her back in her pit. I will attend to them shortly. It will take a little preparation to harness the magic that they hold.

Leach scooped up Mark as if he weighed nothing and disappeared towards Cú Roí's private quarters. Cú Roí followed sedately. Sam stared after them with impotent rage. Then he grabbed Tabby by her hair and dragged her, kicking wildly and screaming through her gag, back towards the birthing pits. As he walked, he slowly worked his anger up into a seething thing of hatred.

When he reached the pits, he dragged her to her feet and tore her gag from her mouth. 'You fucking bitch,' he hissed at her.

'Sam?' she asked in a weak, scared voice. 'Sam, is that you?'

Her pathetic tone only angered him further. 'Yes, it's me, you slut.'

She started to cry. 'Sam, please don't do this. Please help me – I'm scared. You're my husband.'

He grabbed her by the upper arms and shook her violently. 'Your *husband*? You're out there fucking this Mark Jones, and you've got the nerve to say that to me? Whore! Slut! Cunt!' He screamed the last word and backhanded her across the face. The blow launched her backwards, and she fell into the pit silently.

Sam stared down at her still form. Worry suddenly gripped him. What if he

had killed her? Cú Roí would be furious. Then a low moan escaped her, and he sighed in relief. ‘That’s what you get, bitch. That’s what you get for being unfaithful to me.’ Turning, he stalked away from the pit.

Camhlaidh

FIVE STOREYS BELOW A WIDE WINDOW, QUARTZ AND MICA TWINKLED SIDEREALLY from the compact desert sand. Powder-blue light flooded through the window into a wide stone room, bathing it in a tricky glow that threw out a thousand shadows. A bed sat against one wall: a huge four-poster monstrosity, shrouded with dark crumpled sheets. Cam’s gaze was fixed on the shape that was moving beneath them.

He had walked over to the window before he had realised anything else was in the room with him. For a moment, Cam’s nerve nearly broke. The turret was part of The Tower, and he hated The Tower: both Towers. He hated the alien feel of them – the smells, the humidity, the fanciful creatures, and the Gothic architecture. He hated the fear that seemed to be a permanent part of him now, and the feeling of worthlessness that rode alongside it. He hated being so out of his depth, and so terribly far from the comforting world of humanity.

His city, with its lights and laws and flawed, predictable people was far, far away. In Manchester he was a super-being, able to cast spells of confusion and take what he wished. His power had made him arrogant: a whining parody of his race, obsessed with his own petty desires, drowning his disappointment in vats of alcohol. The Tattooist had been right; he was a pathetic child. Spineless. This was his world, here and now, and he couldn’t bear it.

Alone in a bedroom with something that turned slowly beneath the sheets, Cam felt desperately homesick. Fear choked him. Cold sweat drenched him. Without his companions, the last vestiges of his courage leaked away. A tear

collected at the corner of his perfect eye, and he rubbed it away angrily.

Darkness caressed him, and he found that he couldn't move. He wanted to turn and run back through the door, back to the Tattooist who would tell him what to do. Then he thought of the look the fiery eyes would flash him, the disgust the Ifrit would feel, and he held his ground. It was his own fault that he was here – it was Cam who had recognised the figure in the desert. It was Cam who had insisted on following him. He wished he had kept his stupid mouth shut.

God, he missed Manchester. He missed the cold air and the stinging rain. He missed the beggars and the crowds, he missed the hourly chimes of the town hall's bell and the hundreds of cosy pubs, with their soft, dingy rooms that smelled of hops. He missed the atmosphere of the night, of hope and fear and violence. He missed the real world.

Slowly, he stiffened his back and thrust out his chest. There was no going home – not back the way he had come, at any rate. The Tattooist had told him what to do, and Cam would do it. The window – perhaps there was a way to the next apartment along the side of the turret. A ledge or something. Whatever was in the bed was still wriggling languidly, but it didn't seem to have noticed him. Perhaps it was asleep. He placed tentative hands on the windowsill.

'I can smell your fear,' whispered a voice from the bed. Cam felt sick as the sibilant words hissed through the gloom. All his painstakingly gathered resolve fled, screaming into the night. 'I can smell your inadequacies, little creature.'

The sheets suddenly flattened, as if whatever was beneath them had somehow slipped away. Something brushed aside the long hair by his jawline to reveal his ears. 'An Elf, how wonderful,' something said from a shadowy corner of the room. It was female, but the voice was warped and vile as if somewhere far away, unknown nails scraped down a chalkboard whenever the thing spoke. 'I haven't eaten an Elf in such a long time.'

'Who's there?' Cam stuttered, not caring about the tremor in his voice. He stepped away from the window, turning quickly in the centre of the room, trying to find the owner of the voice. Ghostly laughter answered him, and something sharp ran across his cheek, slicing the skin. Hot blood ran down his face. Cam let

out a yelp and raised the shotgun. He swung it around the room wildly, looking for something to shoot at. There was nothing but shadows.

‘What are you going to do with that toy, little Elf?’ A sliver of pale flesh flashed past him. A second line of fire ran down his other cheek, and Cam bit back another cry.

‘Show yourself!’

‘As you wish,’ said the voice from behind him. He spun and faced the door. A woman stood there, her body wrapped in shifting shadow, her face a pale oval with milk-white eyes. Her full lips spread to reveal twin vampire fangs. Cam aimed the gun at her head but didn’t fire. She was insubstantial, ephemeral, and he somehow doubted the gun would do the creature any damage. If he fired, all he’d be doing was letting every blood-hungry monster in the turret know he was there. She smiled as if she were reading his mind.

‘You’re a Svartálfar, aren’t you?’ he asked. ‘A Swart Elf?’

‘Yes, my pretty boy.’ She closed her blank eyes and lifted her perfect nose towards the ceiling. She sniffed delicately. ‘I can smell your blood, Elf. I want it. It is so lonely here in The Tower. My brother will not let me go to the dominion of men to feed anymore. I must make do with what little the Ifrit bring back; poor offerings of flea-ridden beggars and sacks of pigs’ blood.’

She twisted her face in disgust and took a step towards Cam, eyes still closed. Cam took a step backwards.

‘It is too dangerous for us to leave The Tower, he says. We are vulnerable in the light, and the world of men know us. They remember how to hunt us. So, we must stay here until they forget. We who are the hidden death, the eternal shadow, the night terror. Such a shame,’ she whispered with a melancholy sigh. ‘Such a terrible shame. It is a poor existence.’

‘That’s a real tragedy,’ Cam stammered, trying to buy time. He took another step backwards, in the direction of the window. ‘Who is your brother?’

‘He is Damballah, the Prince of Rattlesnakes, first hand of the Satyr of Fire and Air. He is wise, but he is such a fuddy-duddy.’ Her milk-white eyes opened and fixed on Cam. They glowed like twin moons in the blue and purple rinse of twilight. ‘But he would not begrudge me your warmth.’ She took another step

towards him.

Cam desperately tried to remember everything about the Svartálfar. The dark Elves were things of air and shadow, as different to the light Elves as the Ifrit were to the Jötnar. A basis for vampire myths, the Svartálfar were undetectable in shadow and darkness, their insubstantial bodies vanishing into gloomy corners where they waited for their prey to pass, unsuspecting.

Swart Elves were not alive in any conventional sense: They had no flesh of their own; their manifested forms were cold avatars that carried no blood or heat. They could form and disperse a corporeal body at will, but there were two situations where they had no choice but to take a physical shape.

Contact with strong light was one such circumstance. They detested light because it took away their control. Light could not hurt them in and of itself. But once in a tangible form, they were vulnerable to physical harm. Silver could kill them, just as it could kill the other races of the Courts.

The other circumstance in which a Swart Elf was forced to manifest was the drinking of blood. They craved the blood of the other races because it made them feel vivacious. Alive. Real. It was like a drug. It was said that after feeding, they were forced to become solid for a time, for the blood that coursed through them could not be carried any other way.

Get them into strong light, the stories said. Get them into the light and force them to take a physical form. Then cut off their heads. This wasn't a story, though, and there was no light.

'What is your name, Lady?' he asked, trying to keep the conversation going; if he didn't, the Svartálfar would drain him of his life.

'I am Leanan, the Baobhan Sith: The Princess of Darkness!'

'Great, I'm going to get eaten by a coffee liqueur,' Cam muttered under his breath as he backed another step towards the window.

'What are you whispering about, my Love?'

'Nothing. Listen, I've obviously taken a wrong turn somewhere. I'll just leave you to it, shall I? You look a bit pale – you probably want to get back to sleep?'

Leanan's lips twitched. 'Yes, it would be nice to take to my bed ... but I

insist that you join me, my Love. I am beautiful, am I not?’ Something tugged at Cam’s mind. He looked at her again, and indeed she was beautiful.

She looked about twenty – young and innocent. Her skin was flawless, her milk-white eyes, almond-shaped and wide. Her nose was small and pert, and her wide lips were generous and full. Cam realised that the shadow clinging to her body was actually her hair. It was raven and silky smooth, falling in a black waterfall to her feet.

Beneath it, Cam caught glimpses of alabaster skin and realised that Leanan was naked. She brought her hands up to her chest and the curtain parted to reveal long, slim legs that met in the shadow of her pubis. Her narrow waist flared into breasts that were firm and heavy. She cupped them with delicate fingers, her thumbs teasing large, dark nipples. They were erect.

There was something virginal about her, and yet she oozed a lazy sexuality that stoked a fierce heat in Cam’s loins. Before he knew what he was doing, he had dropped the shotgun to the floor with a clatter and stepped towards her, pulling his thick robe off clumsily as he went. It folded onto the floor in a heap behind him as he wrapped his arms around her slim waist. His hands cupped a pair of wonderfully pert buttocks. Her skin was incredibly cold, and somewhere at the back of his mind, Cam was gibbering with terror.

Dreamlike, he bent his head to kiss her icy lips. She avoided his mouth and instead, licked the cuts on his cheeks, first left, then right. He groaned in pleasure. Leanan pulled him gently forwards, and he fell willingly onto the bed. The two sheaths and the sword on his back dug painfully into his spine, but the sensation came from a long way away, muted and dull, as if happening to another person. She straddled him, her pelvis grinding down onto his erect penis, and he groaned again, thrusting up to meet her through the fabric of his jeans.

‘Slowly, my Love,’ she said, her long white canines glinting beautifully in the half-light.

She’s got fucking fangs, he gibbered to himself. She’s going to fucking eat you – it’s a Glamour! She’s cast a Glamour on you, you moron!

Deep in his fugue state, Cam frowned. Leanan licked the cuts on his face again. He felt her shudder. Surely that wasn’t right. Her lips peeled back, and her

jaw unhinged itself with a rasping crack. He watched as she reared back and opened her mouth impossibly wide. Then she leant down and clamped her teeth into the flesh above his shoulder.

Light flashed in front of his eyes. It felt like his core was being drawn from his body through his neck. It's a Glamour, the voice in his head insisted in blind panic.

Cam rolled over and Leanan went with him willingly, her arms and legs wrapping around his torso. Her flesh was suddenly warm and solid beneath his body. Warm. With blood. With his blood.

Realisation struck Cam like a slap in the face. 'Shit,' he said. Pain engulfed his neck, and suddenly he could hear the slurping noise of the vampire feeding on him. 'Arghh!' he shouted. Leanan, sensing the Glamour had faded but not caring, clung on tighter. Cam tried to get onto his hands and knees, but the Svartálfar came with him. His shotgun – where was his shotgun? He had a vague memory of dropping it on the floor.

Pain erupted along his back from when he had fallen to the bed, and he remembered the sword. Reaching back, he pulled it clumsily from its sheath. It felt heavy in his hand; the blood loss was making him weak. He sat up, and knelt awkwardly, while the vampire clung to him like a leach. Holding the sword out to his side, he aimed the point at her chest, just below the armpit, then he thrust it in with all his remaining strength.

Leanan flung herself back and screamed soundlessly. Cam pulled the sword free. Holding it two-handed, he raised it above the Swart Elf and looked down into her milky eyes. She had fed on his blood, and she was bound in mortal form.

'Hurts, doesn't it, you bitch?' Cam asked conversationally. Leanan blinked. Cam thrust the sword down into her open, distended mouth.

The blade slammed through the back of her throat and down into the thick mattress. Cam got up clumsily and leant over the sword. Resting all his weight on the pommel, he thrust down again, ramming it through the mattress and into the wood beneath. He jumped up and down on it a couple of times for good measure.

The bed creaked rhythmically under his ministrations, until the point of the sword was embedded firmly in the board underneath, leaving the vampire pinned to its bed. She twitched spasmodically as a pool of blood seeped out onto the dark sheets.

Cam felt a sense of satisfaction as he looked at that blood, until he realised it was his own. The wound in his neck was deep – she had missed the jugular somehow, but he had lost a lot of blood. He tore up the sheets and wrapped them around his neck a couple of times until he had a thick bandage rubbing under his chin. Then he scooped up his shotgun and turned towards the window with fresh determination.

He climbed out and looked left. There was no ledge, but the brickwork of the big round turret was full of gaps and cracks. Before he could tell himself he was acting hysterically from blood loss, he swung out and began the slow sideways climb to the apartment next door. He tried not to think of the hard, implacable desert five storeys below him.

Back in the room, the last of his blood soaked into the mattress and the Baobhan Sith's body slowly scattered into the darkness in motes and specks of fine matter.

After a second, two moon-bright eyes shone from the dark corner near the window. The sword stood forlornly like a grave marker in the centre of the bed.

ROWAN

THE CHUG OF THE MOTORCYCLE CUT OUT. ROWAN STEPPED FROM THE SADDLE and peered into the dark space of the garage. It was half-past two in the afternoon. Though the rain had stopped, the sky was sleet-grey and forbidding – a thick blanket that diffused the setting sun's rays, weakening them even further,

turning the world into an eye-racking limbo.

Silence hung over the estate. He had fled from Sam and the slim, rubbery man, abandoning his sister to their mercy. The stripped Harley had carried him free of the grounds in a short minute; a hidden transponder in its bodywork opened the gate ahead of him as if by magic. For the last half an hour or so he had circled the area, trying to push his panic away long enough to form a plan. Tabby was his only concern now.

Certain that the imminent threat had passed, Rowan was back. He had some half-formed intention of loading up with high explosives and demolishing the old station. He figured that was where she had been taken. If he could get Tabby out before the charges blew, then he would be happy ... if not ... well, at least he would have tried.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the garage. It was as he had left it. Tabby and Mark were both missing. At least she wasn't lying there dead.

Suddenly galvanised, Rowan moved quickly. First, he found a weapon: another Browning Hi-Power. Slipping it behind the waistband of his combats, he walked over to a locked cabinet in the workshop area beyond the main garage. This was where Mark stored his grenades; when Rowan had kitted himself out initially, he also noticed several blocks of C4.

He kicked the cabinet open and swiftly stacked the C4 into a duffle bag. Then he grabbed a fistful of detonators, put them in a side pocket of the bag, and returned to the garage.

The assault rifle Tabby had been practising with was still on the floor. He picked it up and loaded it. Grabbing as many spare magazines as he could find, he threw them into the bag as well. He slung it over his left shoulder along with the assault rifle, keeping his right hand free. As he began to walk back outside to the Harley, a sound made him spin and pull the Browning in one smooth motion.

Jason stood there with his mouth open in surprise. He threw his hands up in the air. 'It's me,' he shouted. 'Don't shoot, for Christ's sake!' For a moment, Rowan kept the gun trained between the big man's eyes. Then he lowered it and thumbed the safety.

'What are you doing here?' he asked as he tucked the Browning away into

the small of his back.

‘Mr. Jones isn’t answering his phone.’

‘Mr. Jones has been taken. So has my sister.’

Jason closed his eyes and rubbed them tiredly. ‘Shit.’

‘What did you find out about their weaknesses?’

‘Not a lot. I’ve spent the last few hours searching every database, every tome, every scrap of parchment in the system. It’s all pretty generic stuff – nothing you haven’t seen in every werewolf movie that’s ever been on telly.’

‘Tell me anyway.’

Jason shrugged and set one massive buttock on the edge of a workbench. ‘The first reference to someone being a werewolf is an old king – a chap called Lycaon of Arcadia – who Zeus turned into a wolf because he tried to prove Zeus wasn’t a god. He went about it in a rather odd fashion. Apparently Lycaon served Zeus the flesh of his own dead son. Bunch of weird buggers if you ask me.

‘Anyway, in some circles it’s thought that this is where we get the word lycanthrope. Of course, the more established notion is that the word comes from “lycos”, the Greek for wolf, and “anthropos”, which means human being. A lycanthrope is somebody who turns specifically into a wolf. The whole concept of werewolves is thought to have come about as an explanation for serial killers, back when nobody knew about cyclic killings and serious mental illness.

‘When people started turning up dead and mutilated, it was much easier for the peasantry to come up with a fanciful tale of full moons and shape-shifters than come to terms with the fact that the nice chap in the corner hovel was a cannibalistic maniac with far too much testosterone.

‘Interestingly, there is a theory that the whole full-moon myth started because people’s sleep cycles were so thrown off by the brightness of a full moon – obviously, there weren’t any electric lights or anything back then – that people literally went crazy from sleep deprivation. I’m not sure how valid the theory is, but it certainly ...’

‘Jason!’ Rowan snapped irately.

‘Oh, right, yes, sorry. Erm, where was I? Oh yes: werewolves. Well, all I

could really find was the silver thing, which we already knew about. Mr. Jones uses silver-based weaponry as a matter of course against the fairy folk. All the bullets are silver tipped, so that might ...’

Rowan interrupted. ‘Sergei shot one of them in the head. It got straight back up again.’

‘Ah, well. That’s a shame. If that doesn’t have any effect on Autumn and his ilk, I’m a bit stuck. I am also led to believe that Samuel Autumn was decapitated, and it didn’t stop him, so I think we can discount that as well. In fact, none of the old lycanthropy tales have proven in any way helpful.’

‘So, that’s it then?’

‘Not quite. Lycanthropes are people restricted to turning into wolves. I pursued this after the description Sergei gave me of Samuel Autumn’s metamorphosis. However, lycanthropy is, in fact, a subsidiary of a greater genus. The umbrella term for the concept of a person changing into an animal is therianthropy, and Therians are slightly different.

‘Lycanthropes are believed to be creatures of the devil, whereas Therians are thought to be magical creatures, much like the Elves and suchlike that Mr. Jones hunts. I believe that they are related. This is borne out by the old myths of silver being used as weapons against werewolves, when we know it is effective against the fairy folk.

‘I did some further digging on therianthropy, and there are rafts of material: Shamanism, Egyptology, Greek and Roman mythology ... these creatures are scattered through the histories of the world. I did find one rather interesting piece of information regarding some kind of apocalypse for the Therians that occurred around two and a half millennia ago. The father of their race was killed by a tattooed man, and the rest of them were hunted to extinction.’ Jason sat back with a self-satisfied look on his face.

‘So?’ Rowan asked after a moment, irritation threatening to flare into anger.

Jason looked nonplussed. ‘The tattooed ... oh, yes, of course. You don’t know.’

‘Know what, Jason?’

‘Mr. Jones has had me tracking a target – an Elf of rather pathetic means: a

drunkard and wretch, but still an Elf. Mr. Jones intended to hunt it down, but of course we got rather side-tracked by this whole Autumn business.'

'So what?' Rowan growled.

'Well, last Thursday my operatives noticed that the Elf had a new companion. This companion was covered in tattoos. So, this new race of Therians springs up just as a man closely fitting the description of the warrior that destroyed them over two millennia ago reappears? I don't believe in coincidences, Rowan, not ones as big as this at any rate.

'We recorded a conversation that Target One – that's the Elf – and this new man – Target Two – had in a pub in Manchester. I quite forgot that I had set it to translate. Anyway, I checked, and the translation has been done for several hours now.' Jason pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. 'Voilà,' he said. 'And it makes interesting reading.'

'Give it to me,' Rowan said. Jason handed him the paper. After a moment, he looked up. 'The Courts?'

'The Seelie and Unseelie Courts – the two opposing factions of the fairy folk. They live in a Tower somewhere outside of our reality. That's all I really know.'

Rowan went back to reading the transcript. 'Cú Roí?'

'Like the Elf says – he is a bogeyman. His disappearance coincides with the Therian apocalypse. I believe that he is the progenitor of the race.'

'And now he's back?'

'Yes.'

'And he's going to kill everybody unless this tattooed guy gets to have a pop at him?'

'I believe so.'

'And this Cú Roí's the one who's got Tabby?'

'It's more than likely.'

'So, we've got to find this tattooed guy? He's the only one who stands a chance, right?'

'I know where he is.'

'Where?'

‘According to the translation, they were going to pass through a Fairy-Ring and into The Tower. They disappeared on a hill in Lyme Park. I’m guessing that’s where they went through.’

‘Then that’s where we’re going,’ Rowan said. ‘Wake up Sergei. I think he’s in one of the guest bedrooms. We’re going to need every gun we can get.’

MARK

CHAINS CHAFED HIS WRISTS. BLACKNESS SURROUNDED HIM. THE DARKNESS WAS a physical thing, crowding into his eyes, clawing at his face, reaching, cold and ophidian, down his throat to tickle at his heart. The air was chill and dank. The only noise was the dripping of water some interminable distance away.

Hanging naked in the centre of the room, Mark cursed himself for a fool. The alarms hadn’t gone off. Autumn and his friend had been let in. There was only one person it could have been – Sergei. It had to be. Jason had let him into the house. Mark had ushered him off unattended to get a shower and some sleep. The mercenary knew where Mark’s office was, knew how to open the main gate and disable the door security. Mark had been an idiot – what could the monsters offer a mercenary? Power. All the power in the world. They had turned him. It was so obvious. How could he have been so stupid? The question echoed in his head, and Mark did not know if he was asking it of Sergei, or himself.

One thing was clear though: the Russian had betrayed him and put Tabitha in terrible danger. In his lonely prison, Mark swore to himself that the man would die, and that he would not die well.

Camhlaidh

STILL DIZZY FROM LOSS OF BLOOD, CAM CLUNG TO THE SIDE OF THE TURRET AT the top of The Tower at Dusk. The window to the next apartment was almost within his reach. The air was thick and heavy around him. The bruised sky disappeared in all directions, hulking clouds spinning across the horizon. Above, there was nothing but hazy darkness. Below, the lunar landscape of the desert promised a pulverising death. Cam concentrated on the next finger hold and edged another few inches across.

Numb fingers grabbed the edge of the window, and with a sigh of relief, Cam swung himself into a small room full of boxes and bric-a-brac. As he unholstered the shotgun, Cam was pleased to note that the room did not have a bed in it. Then he moved like he had seen in the movies, gun pointed out ahead of him, looking down the barrel so that where he could see, he could shoot.

Silently letting himself out of the storage room, he found himself in a narrow corridor. Fifteen feet to his right there was a large door. He figured this was the door that led back to where the Tattooist and the guards waited. There were more doors on either side, but they looked dusty and unused. Another corridor ran off at a right angle to the one he was currently in.

Walking quickly but quietly, Cam made his way to the junction and peeped around. It was empty. At the far end was a spiral staircase in a free-standing iron frame. He went over and peered up it. More of the twilight gloom awaited him at the top. He stood there for a second in indecision. Then he heard a door behind him open and close. Gasping with cold fear, Cam ran up the stairs two at a time, wishing he had thought to put the hooded robe back on. He felt naked without the disguise.

He ignored the first landing he came to and ran up another level just to be sure. The staircase terminated there, and Cam found himself in a low room with doors in each direction. He was near the roof of the turret, and the ceiling above him was curved. Long tapestries, ragged blue and purple affairs, covered the

walls. Waist-high columns rested in each corner. On top of each one sat a blackened skull with weak candles flaming in the eye sockets. It made the room treacherous with flickering shadows. Picking a door at random, Cam went through and closed it gently behind him.

This time, he found himself on a narrow curving balcony. The ceiling arced in a high dome out over a wide gloomy hall. A massive throne, carved from black stone, had been placed directly beneath the centre of the dome. Something sat in the throne, something hidden in deep shadow. The man he had followed stood before it; Cam grinned in triumph. The two were talking.

‘She is still under control?’ asked Master Creachmhaoil.

‘Yes,’ a cadaverous voice said from the throne. ‘She is in Kilmanoi’s Hall. The Blind Room holds her. I have an army of Ifrit guarding her and the Hall.’

‘In The Tower at Dawn? Are you mad? If anybody finds out, they’ll think it’s an invasion ...’

‘And what? Your people are weak, Elf. Even if they had the means to penetrate so far into their own territory, they could not defeat me. The Ifrit guard against those creatures that swarm the lower levels of your home. They are necessary – it would not do for her to escape now, would it?’

Creachmhaoil nodded. ‘If she ever gets out, Damballah, we’ll both be finished.’

‘You fear your mistress, Elf?’ chuckled the voice.

‘I doubt the Satyr would be best pleased, either, if he found his wife was being held against her will.’

‘The Satyr of Fire and Air has not been seen in eight hundred years,’ Damballah said dismissively.

Creachmhaoil grunted irritably. ‘How do your experiments progress?’

‘It is useless. The last of the Therians died centuries ago, killed by the humans. If there are more, they have hidden well. Without them to study, I cannot reproduce the spell accurately. After the last attempt ... you know how flawed the Firstcomer’s magic was. After that failure, I am unwilling to risk another guess.’

‘Then I believe I bring good news.’

‘It better had be, Elf,’ Damballah said lethargically. ‘My people slip away one by one, and without me, your own people will suffer a similar fate.’

‘Oh, it is good news. Your witchery worked. It found Cú Roí: The Miracle Child is finally returned to us!’

There was a moment of silence. ‘Ah, the spell finally found him ... good. After all this time, I had quite given up hope. You have him?’

‘No, that monster Leach got to him first.’

‘So, the worm still lives? Amazing really. Where is the Miracle Child now?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Even if we did, he is useless without the Seed ... Cú Roí may show us the path, but without the Seed, we still lack the means to follow it.’

‘Cú Roí has returned ... and with him, that tattooed Jöttnar who hunts him,’ Creachmhaoil said with satisfaction.

‘Impossible! Grímnir was ripped to pieces. He is dead ... unless ... the Maiden’s magic? The Seed – it must be: where else could she have put it, the devious bitch!’ Damballah's voice was hungry.

Even from up on the cramped little balcony, Cam saw Creachmhaoil smile. ‘As I said: good news.’

Damballah stood from his throne and walked towards Creachmhaoil. He was tall, very tall, around seven feet and spindle thin. His body was comprised of shadows that shifted like clouds in a gentle breeze, leaving him without features. Some twisted down his back and splayed on the floor in an amorphous cloak. He looked like a man’s shadow, stretched out thin from a low-angled lamp.

‘We must have them both. If I can study the Miracle Child ... if I can harness the Seed, then I could save us all. The mistakes of the past would not be made again ...’

‘I have the Jöttnar’s trust. It is the Miracle Child that will prove difficult.’

‘We will find ...’ Damballah’s next words were cut off by the sound of a door being flung open. Cam strained his neck and saw Leanan storm into the room.

‘Shit,’ he muttered under his breath and tried to pull back out of sight. It was too late. Two milk-white eyes settled on him, and her face twisted in a riot of

hatred and triumph.

‘You have a spy, brother,’ she shouted and pointed up at Cam, even as her body faded away. Cam stood up and turned to run back the way he had come, but she was there behind him, morphing out of the shadows and streaking towards him, her mouth wide open, fangs bared and shining.

Cam tried to bring the shotgun around, but she cannoned into him and he stumbled backwards. His back hit the railing and he teetered on the edge ... and then he was falling.

As an Elf, Cam was blessed with incredible speed and agility. He put it to good use, throwing his falling body around, twisting impossibly, and pushing his feet out below him just as the stone floor rose to meet him. He bent his legs, letting the force of the impact run through his body, hands spread for balance, until he was crouching on the floor. The shotgun lay in front of him, his hand at the weapon’s centre.

Immediately he was moving. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leanan striding from another shadow. Damballah appeared to be watching the events in polite confusion. Creachmhaoil stared in shock. Cam darted towards the older Elf and grabbed him by the throat before he could react. Spinning Creachmhaoil’s body, he wrapped an arm around his neck and jammed the shotgun under his chin. It took less than three heartbeats.

‘It’s silver twelve-gauge.’ Leanan stopped at the mention of silver. ‘One more step, and I’ll blow his head off.’ The words sounded a lot calmer than Cam felt.

Damballah held out his wraith’s hand and Leanan went to stand at his side. ‘What makes you think I care?’

‘Because I’m still alive. You need him, or Vampirella over there would be sucking me dry right now. Let me go, and he can walk.’

‘Then go,’ Damballah said pleasantly.

‘He’s coming with me to the Fairy-Ring.’

‘Fine, fine. I won’t try and stop you.’

Cam slowly backed towards the door, pulling Creachmhaoil with him and avoiding the deep shadows obsessively. ‘Stay where I can see you,’ he warned

the siblings.

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ Damballah said, making no attempt to move. ‘Go on – away with you.’

Slowly, Cam edged Creachmhaoil towards the door. He backed into it, pushing it open, and hoped that the Tattooist was still out in the corridor waiting for him. The two Ifrit who guarded the door started when Cam came out; he warned them back, but they didn’t look convinced.

‘Let them go,’ said the voice of the Prince of Rattlesnakes from out of the shadows. Cam shuddered. The Ifrit backed off wordlessly. The Tattooist appeared, carrying a burning torch. ‘Stay as much in the light as possible,’ he hissed. ‘Step into the shadows, and they’ll take you before you know what’s happening.’

‘What do you think I’ve been doing?’ Cam muttered back. ‘I’m not a complete idiot.’ The Tattooist grunted in obvious disagreement. His eyes burned, and the shadows receded further. ‘We can’t go around the Fairy-Ring like this,’ Cam said, ignoring the Tattooist’s disdain. ‘He has to go willingly, or the magic won’t work.’

‘We leave him here,’ the Tattooist said.

‘You are a fool, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha,’ Creachmhaoil said as they walked. ‘You have signed your death warrant. I will do everything in my power to exterminate you – you won’t be safe in either Court.’

‘I can guess why – don’t want anybody to know you’re good mates with a fucking Ringwraith, right?’

‘You have no idea what I am doing here.’

‘Collaborating, by the looks of things. And you want to betray Grímnir.’

‘I seem to recall you were in agreement when I sent you into The Tower with him.’

‘That was before I knew you were in cahoots with count nob-feratu and his merry band of bloodsuckers.’

‘You are a child, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha. You know nothing of what I am trying to accomplish. You yourself have whined constantly that the Courts are not doing enough to save our races. Now that I am, you whine that we shouldn’t

work together. You are ridiculous.’ Cam didn’t answer. ‘No words, boy? No arguments? No petty threats? Maybe you are learning.’

‘Maybe so. Now stop dragging your feet.’

They kept going. Cam’s arm began to ache beneath the weight of the shotgun. Together, the three of them made it out of the turret and into the desert on top of The Tower at Dusk. A crowd of Ifrit followed, maybe thirty of them, but every time they looked like they were about to attack, the voice of Damballah intervened, echoing from the deepest shadows. With every step they took into the desert, the crowd around them grew, flaming eyes watching them hungrily, the silence absolute. Cam found that his throat was very dry. It took them five harrowing minutes to make it to the Fairy-Ring nearest the turret. It took them another twenty to make it to the mirror of the one that he had originally entered The Tower at Dawn through with Grímnir and Dow.

‘You really are important to them, aren’t you?’ Cam asked Creachmhaoil.

‘I can control the Jötnar.’

‘You think?’

‘Grímnir Vafthrúdnir trusts me. Where is he, by the way?’

‘Subtle.’ They were finally stood at the edge of the Fairy-Ring. It was desolate here. There was no forest, no birdsong, no stream, no swans. No dawn sun. No life except the crowd of silent Ifrit. He jammed the shotgun under Creachmhaoil’s ribs. ‘You’re going to walk around with us until you can’t feel the shotgun anymore. Any funny business, and I’ll split you open.’

They began to walk in a circle. ‘Where is Grímnir Vafthrúdnir?’ Creachmhaoil asked again. The desert, the crowd of Ifrit, everything was fading.

Before the world completely disappeared, Cam gave Creachmhaoil his answer. ‘He is trapped somewhere in The Tower at Dawn with Dow Sé Mochaomhog, surrounded by the Twisted.’

Then they stood back on the hill in Lyme Park. A short white man with a muscular build and close-cropped hair pointed an assault rifle at Cam’s belly. The gunman’s blue eyes were cold beneath the moon, and steel teeth glinted menacingly in the half-light as he smiled.

‘You must be Target One,’ he said without a hint of friendliness. ‘Drop the

shotgun.’

CREACHMHAOIL

DAMBALLAH STRODE THROUGH THE CROWD TO WHERE CREACHMHAOIL STOOD AT the Fairy-Ring. The Elf was apoplectic with rage.

‘The little bastard,’ he said. ‘I’m going to kill him.’

‘No, you aren’t. You are going to find the Jötnar. We need him.’

‘A couple of zombies can’t kill him,’ Creachmhaoil said dismissively.

‘I didn’t say they could. Just bring him to me.’

‘What about Cú Roí?’

‘Leave him to me – it is about time the Prince of Rattlesnakes took an interest in the realms of men once more. Before I do, I must gather my retinue and return to the Blind Room in The Tower at Dawn. I must ensure that the cohorts guarding it are aware of this new threat – it would not do for that young Elf to disrupt things there.’

‘I agree; Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha knows too much. Did you see who he was with?’

‘Yes – and he stank of weakness, just like your bitch mistress. The Maiden must have anticipated the waning of their power. That is why she hid the Seed,’ Damballah said quietly. ‘He is nothing to fear; your worries are baseless. No wonder he hid in the depths of The Tower. He is feeble and pathetic.’ He paused. ‘I have a special treat for him and the boy.’

A wave ran through the crowd of Ifrit. They parted to reveal a thing of shadow, which came skittering towards them on eight legs. It resembled a spider, except that its limbs were fluid on its body, moving where they needed to be, stretching like putty. At rest, each leg was thick and squat, with a curved rim near its tapered point.

‘A Sylph?’ Creachmhaoil asked. ‘Oh, jolly good,’ he laughed into the

twilight of the desert.

ROWAN

ROWAN CONCEALED HIS SURPRISE WELL. THE TALL MAN IN FRONT OF HIM dropped an evil-looking Remington 870 shotgun to the grass.

‘I thought you lot ran around with swords,’ he said, still pointing his L85A2 at Target One.

‘Comments like that are why I’ll kick the crap out of Tolkien if I ever get a grip of him in the hereafter,’ the Elf said wearily. Rowan flicked on the Maglite at the end of his rifle and examined the creature. In some respects, he was exactly as expected ... in others he was completely different.

He looked the part on the surface: The Elf’s eyes were a deep, vivacious violet that sparkled hauntingly in the glare of the flashlight. Thick, blond hair spilled around his face and down his back in an artless tumble. His face was narrow and perfectly proportioned, with high cheekbones, full lips, and skin that was as smooth and unblemished as a marble statue. The perfection was marred by inch-long cuts on each cheek. They were shallow but they’d bled, leaving red smears like war paint on the Elf’s face.

Though his features were elfin, his attire was not. He wore jeans and trainers, a chain mail shirt, and some bits and pieces of scruffy, tarnished armour, all splattered with drying blood. A shoulder bag rested on his hip and a couple of empty sheaths were slung across his back. Rowan realised he had anticipated bows and arrows and leather jerkins. The heavy, acrid smell of smoke and sweat came from him in stinking waves. Incongruously, he had a cravat of dark red material wrapped around his neck.

It was the weariness washing from the creature that made Rowan realise this

was not some fairy tale Elf. There was none of the tranquil wisdom and unearthly grace that he had expected from an immortal: The Elf was bone tired and filthy.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got anything to drink, do you?’ asked Target One. Wordlessly, Rowan handed him his canteen of water. The Elf opened it, looked into it with mild disgust, sniffed it and then took a tentative sip. He handed the water back to Rowan with a very ungracious grimace. ‘Anything alcoholic?’

‘No,’ Rowan said.

‘Figures.’ The Elf sat down on the grass, then lay back and closed his eyes.

‘Watch him,’ Rowan said to Sergei. The mercenary turned his gun on the apparently sleeping figure. Rowan turned to the other captive: the one that had appeared shortly before the Elf. This prisoner worried Rowan. He had Jason and Jason’s spotter – an ex-soldier called Jim Zacharias – covering it with guns. Jason said it was an Ifrit.

The Ifrit was obviously inhuman – seven feet tall with flaming eyes that caressed his face in bursts and pulses of heat, like small suns that flared every few seconds. Their fires licked out over his cheeks, singeing and blistering them for short seconds before they healed. The Ifrit stood very still. He had refused to relinquish the two meat cleavers by his side, and Rowan didn’t really want to send anybody in after them. He turned back to the Elf.

‘We’re looking for a tattooed man,’ he said to Target One.

The Elf opened one sparkling eye and looked at him. ‘What for?’

Rowan wagged the muzzle of the assault rifle at him. ‘I think I’ll ask the questions,’ he said. The Elf sighed melodramatically.

A wave of warmth washed through Rowan’s mind. He gasped with pleasure and tried to remember what he was doing. He was holding a gun, aiming it at a bit of grass on a cold hill. It was night. Puzzled, he looked around. Jason and Sergei were there, and another man ... Jim ... that was his name.

‘What are we doing here?’ Jason asked in confusion.

Something cold jammed itself into the back of Rowan’s neck. ‘Good question,’ a pure, melodic voice said from behind him. The fugue fell away and Rowan tensed. Reality spun back in. ‘I don’t really want to kill you,’ Target One

said in his ear, ‘but you wouldn’t believe the week I’ve been having. Drop the weapon.’

From the corner of his eye, Rowan saw the big Ifrit herd his three companions into the Fairy-Ring. They no longer had their guns. Rowan let the L85A2 tumble to the ground. Target One poked him in the back of the neck with his shotgun, and Rowan obediently went and sat next to the others. His mind was working furiously.

‘What did you do to us?’ he hissed.

‘Nothing to worry about,’ the Elf said. ‘Now, why don’t you tell me why you’re here and what you want the tattooed man for, and we’ll take it from there, shall we?’

Rowan weighed up his options. ‘Right,’ he said, his shoulders sagging in resignation. He told them what had happened, carefully leaving out Mark’s murderous plans for Target One. The Elf listened quietly until he had finished.

‘We came here about an hour ago, looking for a way through the Fairy-Ring – we couldn’t work it out.’

‘You’re lucky you didn’t,’ said the Elf. ‘You’d probably be falling through the void right now if you had. So, you want Cú Roí dead too? You’ll get on just fine with Grímnir.’

‘Who’s Grímnir?’

‘The tattooed man you’re looking for.’ The Elf lowered the shotgun. ‘You might as well stand up; it looks like we want near enough the same things that we might as well be civil to each other.’

Rowan stood up uncertainly. ‘What exactly do you want?’

‘A stiff drink. You’ve got transport, right?’

‘Yes,’

‘Good – you can give me a lift.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To see my father.’ The Elf shuddered theatrically. ‘I hope you’re brave. Tell me, why did you call me “Target One”?’

‘Er, it’s just what we’ve been calling you.’

‘Nice. What’s your name?’

‘Rowan.’

‘I’m Cam. Remember, Rowan, if you try and screw me, I’ll turn your mind into tapioca.’ Cam smiled at him. It was not a reassuring smile.

The small group walked into the forest. Nobody noticed the shifting form of the Sylph materialise from the Fairy-Ring and skitter after them in its peculiar disjointed run. Thick shadow engulfed it, and it faded from sight.

DOW

IT WAS A SERIOUS WOUND. DOW CLUTCHED HIS SIDE WITH GAUNTLETED HANDS and watched the big man fight off the hordes. High-pitched screeches lashed the narrow bridge as Grímnir sent the last of the zombie creatures to their final deaths. Dow watched, mesmerised by the sheer elemental power of the Jötnar. Then the big warrior scooped Dow back up into his arms, and their interminable flight began again.

The chainsaw had run out of petrol hours ago, in the long retreat from the hordes of ORCs. Now Grímnir was using it as a jagged club, swinging it into the heads and necks of the rotting carcasses that hunted them. His prestigious strength turned it from an awkward hunk of metal into a deadly weapon.

Dow supposed he should be thankful that the motor was dead – if it had still been running, the sucking gash above his left hip would have been a lot worse. The chainsaw would probably have split him in half.

It was the Death’s Head zombie. Camhlaidh had been right about that one: it was smart. Dow idly wondered who it was, back when it was alive.

After losing Cam and the Ifrit – and with them the way to the Fairy-Ring – Grímnir and Dow fought their way back through the Tattooist’s apartments. Grímnir was indomitable; the spells woven into the tattoos that covered his body proved their worth repeatedly. Dow lost count of the times the big man took a wound to prevent Dow being infected by the creatures, using his own body to

absorb the gouges and bites meant for the Elf.

The Tattooist was right: Grímnir appeared immune to the gnawing and clawing of the zombies. Where he took an injury, the tattooed dragons came alive, slithering and writhing until blue scales covered the wound.

The Tattooist's apartments were huge and labyrinthine. They fought a painfully slow retreat through dusty room after dusty room. Eventually, they came to another huge portal with a bridge beyond it. An iron portcullis blocked their way, but fortunately it was a defensive structure, and the winch was on their side. Grímnir kept the decomposing hordes at bay while Dow opened it just enough for them to duck under.

They could not close it from the other side, and they backed over the bridge, across another vast well, knocking ranks of the Twisted into the void. They made a temporary stand in the alcove at the far end. The zombies could only come at them one at a time. Dow saw the Death's Head zombie stood still on the other side, just past the portcullis, staring at them with lidless black eyes.

A huge creature with no lower jaw had ripped a rotten leg from another zombie and swung it at Dow's head, forcing him to sway backwards. When he regained his balance, he smashed one gauntlet into the side of the thing's head. The impact caved in its temple, and blood spurted out on to Dow's chest. The powerful punch knocked it from the bridge, and it tumbled into the darkness.

Looking back up in the moment of respite, Dow saw that the Death's Head zombie had vanished. A female Elf with entrails falling from her belly like an obscene grass skirt attacked him, and he forgot all about the skull-faced Twisted.

Forced back into the tunnels, they retreated through the first available door and slammed it shut behind them, leaving the zombies howling and scratching on the other side. 'They are crowding it,' Grímnir said. 'They will not have enough room to batter it down.'

The hinges groaned theatrically. 'I have a feeling sheer weight of numbers will see them through in a minute or two,' Dow replied quietly. 'Do you know where we are?'

'I have an idea we are in one of the honeycombs near the edge of The Tower: The bridges we have seen criss-cross this area. Good defensive formations.'

‘Can we get back up?’

‘We can try.’ Grímnir looked around the room. There were two more doors. ‘This is a guard room. It will be at the top of a pillar. Those doors will lead to other bridges. That one,’ he said, pointing to the one to their left, ‘should take us towards the edge of The Tower. If we can find a stairwell, we might be able to escape.’

‘Let’s go then,’ Dow said, pulling the door open. The Death’s Head zombie was waiting for him. It lashed out and Dow stepped backwards, all his grace deserting him in the shock of seeing the monster. His feet tangled and he stumbled. The second swing came at his face, and Dow saw his death there.

A massive pain shot through his side. Everything slowed. Something metallic dragged from his left hip, up across his front, and then slammed into the bare skull of the Death’s Head zombie. The force threw it backwards where it crunched against a wall before sliding down to the floor, properly dead at last.

Dow folded to the floor, his scream ringing in his ears. As he fell, he watched Grímnir step past him, the chainsaw finishing its arc up to his left shoulder. He immediately understood what had happened, and horror hit him like a gut shot: seeing the threat, Grímnir had done the only thing he could. With Dow so close to the Twisted, and with no clear line of attack, he had ripped the chainsaw through Dow’s side to crush the thing’s skull.

Grímnir knelt beside him. ‘I am sorry, my friend,’ he said, his hands pushing the base of the wound to make it bleed. ‘There was no other way.’

Dow screamed again as Grímnir pushed mercilessly at his side, forcing blood to gout. Then he put his mouth to the wound and began to suck. The pain was such that Dow lost consciousness for a moment. When he awoke, Grímnir was still sucking. Judging by the pool of blood to his right, he had already drawn a lot out. The door was creaking alarmingly behind them, and Dow felt very weak.

‘We have to move,’ Dow managed through gritted teeth.

‘The chainsaw was covered in the blood of these unclean things – I have to get it all out.’

‘I know, but it is too late now. Better we get out of here.’ Grímnir didn’t argue. Scooping Dow up to his powerful chest he walked quickly out the door

and closed it behind them.

‘That will hold them for a few minutes.’ Then the Jötnar ran.

It was a confusing, painful ride for Dow. The chainsaw sheathed at the big man’s side bumped his whirling head, the dark tunnels absorbed light, and the darkness pressed over him like a drug. Sometimes they would stop, and Grímnir would lay him down gently before turning to fight.

Consciousness became fleeting and ephemeral, and every time he woke, the scene was the same: Grímnir’s panting breath above him, the dry air scratching at his throat, and the wetness on his lower torso where blood still ran freely from his wound. A human would have died ten times over in that nightmare flight, but Dow was an Elf, and he held on. Eventually blackness took him, and he slipped into fever dreams.

He woke to find himself lying on a stone table in a large banquet hall. Dawn light flooded in from a large window. Grímnir sat nearby, his shoulders hunched. He appeared to be cleaning his chainsaw with a rag. Dow groaned, and the big man turned and came over quickly.

‘You are awake.’

‘Barely.’ Dow looked down at his side. More rags had been packed over the wound and strapped in with his belt. He let his head fall back to the table. ‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘We left the Twisted somewhere below. They have difficulty with doors. We have a chance now.’

‘Maybe,’ Dow said with a sad smile.

‘I might have got the poison out in time.’

‘We’ll find out within twelve hours, won’t we?’ Dow said as he closed his eyes. Sleep came quickly, and he welcomed it.

MAJK

THOUGH IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY WHAT TIME IT WAS IN THE DENSE BLACKNESS of the basement, Mark guessed it was getting late. He had been strung up in this little room for hours.

He swung helplessly in a chill draught, his arms stretched up above him, manacled wrists suspended by chains that rasped as the links twisted. His naked toes brushed the floor, but he was too high to get any real purchase.

A door opened. Two men walked into his cell. One was incredibly tall with weird, glittering, hypnotic eyes. The other was smaller and had a clammy, greasy quality. Mark recognised him: it was the man who had kidnapped him. In one hand, the shorter man carried an old-fashioned torch: a flaming amalgamation of a broken chair leg and oil-soaked rags. The firelight flickered on his abnormally pale skin. In his other hand he carried a sword.

The tall one walked up to Mark and examined him intently. Cold, long fingers caressed his chin, and Mark tried to bite at them. His captor laughed sibilantly – the noise of dry leaves blown across concrete.

You are not frightened. The voice slammed into the back of Mark's skull, ricocheting through his mind and forcing a groan from his lips. *I can sense fear in creatures such as you, and you are not frightened. You have power as well. Magic. Strong magic that will soon be mine. I am curious about this magic, and curiosity is a thing I savour, for it is so rare in this banal world.*

'What are you?' Mark managed through gritted teeth. The voice in his mind left him feeling unclean, as if he had been molested – invaded against his will.

I am the pinnacle of creation. They called me the Miracle Child when I was born, for I am impossible. What of you, though? What are you?

'I am a man.'

Soundless laughter echoed in Mark's mind. *You are no more a man than I. The magic that holds you here has stripped you of that. What are you?*

'Fuck off.'

More laughter. *Perhaps if I shared something of myself with you ... I am a half-breed. Do you know anything of the Courts? There are four separate races of what you call fairies – Elves, Jötnar, Ifrit, and Svartálfar. These races are distinct in their physiognomy. They cannot mate. Yet a Svartálfar raped an Ifrit,*

and I was the result. A miracle. A monster.

‘All I need to know is you’re one of them. I’ll kill you for that.’

One of them? No, they hate me, for I am power incarnate. They sought to destroy me, forged a sword of magic and crafted a warrior without peer to hunt me down. I escaped, casting huge magics, ripping a hole in time, which I fell through. I escaped their bigotry, and soon I will hunt them. I despise them. We are the same, you and I.

‘I’m nothing like you.’

I want them dead just as you do. We are the same.

‘You know nothing of what they did to me.’

So, tell me.

Mark clenched his lips together in obstinate silence.

Then what use are you to me other than another source of power – another meal? The tall creature leaned closer and stared into Mark’s eyes. Surrender yourself to me. Surrender the magic inside you. I know you, Marcus Aquila Romila. I see you.

The last three words were almost a sigh. They fissled through his head touching here and there as they went. Mark felt something pulling at him: twisting in his soul. Snapshots from his life flashed across his mind’s eye. Memories from his childhood, his youth; his eternity flipped past like images in a zoetrope. Then they stopped, and one of the echoes snapped into sharp focus. He saw Annaea’s corpse resting against the tree. He saw the wound in her neck.

Yes, the magic was forced upon you. You know what it is. You know what it has done. It is an infection. It is a disease. I can take it away. I can heal you. I can save you. Just ... let ... me ... in.

For a second Mark felt the gates to his consciousness opening. He wanted to succumb to the creature’s seduction. He wanted to die. Mark tried to let go ... and something slammed down between them. Instantly the images disappeared, and with a rush of guilt, Mark remembered Tabitha. He couldn’t die. Not yet.

The tall man staggered backwards. Weird eyes settled on Mark. *It appears that the magic that sustains you is not yours to cede. No matter – I have other means. If you cannot give it to me, then I shall take it.*

Once again, cold fingers clamped around Mark's chin. Inexorably, his head was pushed back until he was looking at the dank brick ceiling. He tried to thrash his way loose, but he was caught fast in the monster's iron grip. Something small and sharp dug into his neck, and he flinched. Then pain set in as the thing began to gnaw through the flesh and gristle at his collarbone. Mark felt his blood spurt, and the creature began to guzzle greedily at the wound.

Suddenly it stopped. There was a pause, and Mark felt his flesh healing. A trickle of blood continued to run down his chest, tickling him. The tall man tried again, burrowing sharp little teeth into his throat.

This time Mark shouted, more in rage and disgust than fear. Again, the Miracle Child stopped. Mark felt it step back. The thing spat, and Mark knew it was his blood being hawked onto the floor. He smelled its coppery taint in the air.

There was a moment of silence. *Even your blood is unpalatable. You are an unknown element, Marcus Aquila Romila. I do not like things that are out of my control. As curious as I am, and as much as I might enjoy solving your puzzle, my position is delicate. With regret, I think it is best that you and your strange magic simply end here.*

'Good luck with that,' Mark said.

I don't need luck. Leach, hand me the sword. The slimy man gave it to the Miracle Child subserviently. The giant tossed his lank, black hair back and smiled at Mark with razor-sharp, bloodstained teeth. His eyes were pale crystals, suspended in a void. He held up the sword.

It glowed with a silver light, shot with rainbows. Its hilt was leather-wrapped, and its blade was scored with dozens of alien sigils, which gave the blade its multi-coloured hue.

'Very pretty,' Mark said.

This is Camulus. It, in conjunction with the one creature capable of wielding it properly, was designed to kill me. One bearing the correct charms, you understand. If you, or anyone other than the tattooed zealot tried to use it against me, you would discover it is little more than an attractive bauble. And I take terminal exception to being poked with pieces of metal. But it has its uses. It

will kill my progeny and others who might otherwise avoid mortal injury. Such as yourself. Stepping forwards, the giant rammed the sword through Mark's chest, piercing his heart. It hurt going in. Mark groaned. It hurt even more coming out.

Still alive. Remarkable. He stabbed Mark again, this time through the stomach, severing the spinal column. Mark fouled himself. Urine and faeces splashed to the damp stone floor, and the effluence stained the backs of his legs. The sword came out again and Mark's thighs twitched as he healed. *Remarkable indeed. What are you?* His tormentor stepped back and surveyed him thoughtfully. *Perhaps if harm was to come to the girl which you are linked to...*

'You leave her alone, you son of a bitch!' Mark shouted.

The Miracle Child smiled. *She is the key. Perhaps I will minister to her as I have done the other women in this hovel. Perhaps if she were a mother ...*

'Fuck you!' Mark bellowed. 'Fuck you! I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!'

Quite. The giant passed the sword to Leach. *You may return here when our business this evening is concluded,* he said to the smaller creature. *Keep at him. Enjoy yourself. Try not to eat him until he's dead – he might give you a bellyache.* The giant left and Leach advanced on Mark.

There was no pity or sanity in his pale eyes. They were empty and dead. He pushed Camulus into Mark's stomach and stepped back, leaving the sword embedded there. Mark yelled in agony. Leach watched for a moment and then turned to follow his Master, leaving Mark alone with his pain.

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MANANNÁN Ó GRÍOBHTHA HAD EXPLORED MOST OF THE WORLD, ACQUIRED several fortunes, and seen cultures rise and fall. He had fought, loved, hated, and killed across continents, and as far as his son knew, he only had one regret. In

five and a half centuries, Manannán had only sired one heir: Cam. Cam knew he was a bitter disappointment to his father.

As he stared at the buzzer to the flats at No. 1 Deansgate, in Manchester City Centre, Cam felt familiar coils of trepidation writhe across his shoulder blades.

‘Which one is it?’ Rowan demanded impatiently.

‘It’s one of the penthouses at the top,’ he muttered.

‘What number?’

‘Look, me and my dad have a bit of a strained relationship ... maybe we should come ...’

‘Which one?’ This time it was the Tattooist’s dangerous growl. Cam gave up. He gave Rowan the number and he punched it in. A few seconds passed as the tinny buzzer trilled through the intercom.

There was a click. ‘Can I help?’ a soft, pleasant voice asked.

‘Er, Dad? It’s Cam. Camhlaidh. Can I come up?’

A pause. ‘Are you alone?’

‘No. I’ve got some ... friends ... with me.’

‘Really, Camhlaidh, it’s rather late. Maybe you should come back tomorrow.’

‘Listen, Sir,’ Rowan interrupted, ‘a bunch of shape-shifting freaks have got my sister, and I’m told you’re the only one who can help. Can we at least come up and talk to you?’

They waited for a long moment. ‘Come up.’ Manannán gave directions and the door clicked open. The small party made their way upstairs. Cam could feel a pool of cold sweat forming in his underwear.

ROWAN

ROWAN WATCHED HIS FIVE COMPANIONS AS THEY MADE THEIR WAY UP IN THE

lift. It was cramped, and Rowan could smell sweat from the Elf and a subtle sulphurous odour from the Ifrit. Jason was staring at the Ifrit, Sergei was staring at Cam, and Jason's spotter had his face pointed up towards the ceiling with his eyes closed.

The Elf fidgeted. His lips twitched noiselessly, turning his beautiful face into something slightly disturbing. He still had the shotgun; his fingers clenched and unclenched nervously around its barrel. Rowan watched him pensively. When he turned an assault rifle on the creature, it had flopped to the ground as if it was on a beach holiday, but now that they were going to see its father, it seemed to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Rowan began to feel slightly apprehensive.

In stark contrast, the Ifrit appeared relaxed, its huge form filling a quarter of the lift. Then again, who knew what it was thinking – how could you tell when the thing didn't have eyes? As if on cue, two loops of smoking flame spurted out and singed Sergei's cheek.

Sergei flinched and opened his mouth to say something. He changed his mind and looked away from the gigantic being, rubbing his face and muttering under his breath in Russian. Rowan looked back at Cam. His eyes were closed, and his lips were still. Where he clutched the shotgun, the Elf's knuckles were white with stress.

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CAM WASN'T SCARED. IT WAS JUST THAT WHENEVER HE HAD TO SEE HIS FATHER, he felt like he was going into an exam that he knew he couldn't pass. Earlier, he had met his father simply to hand over Grímnir to the Court. Now he was here asking for help, and he was nervous.

Why was he here? He was out of The Tower. It wouldn't have taken much to lose the Ifrit in the city, and a Glamour would have beguiled the humans long

enough to slip away. What could possibly have possessed him to voluntarily come up here to speak with his father? He would have to bear the looks of disappointment and withering comments, and for what?

In fact, his behaviour over the last few days had been increasingly strange; ever since he met Grímnir, he had been doing sillier and sillier things. Going into The Tower, fighting the Twisted, sneaking into the lair of the Svartálfar, fighting the vampire bitch, facing down the Prince of Rattlesnakes, holding Creachmhaoil hostage ... it was all very out of character.

It was Grímnir's fault. Dow's too. He hated to admit it, but he liked the big man, and Dow had proved to be decent enough – he had saved Cam's life, and Cam liked to think that he had saved Dow's on the narrow bridge in front of the Tattooist's home. A bond had formed between the three of them in the dark, narrow confines of The Tower at Dawn, and Cam was surprised to find that he really did want to help his friends.

His epiphany was punctuated by the gentle chime of the lift's doors opening.

ROWAN

ROWAN FOLLOWED CAM ALONG THE CORRIDOR. HE STILL SEEMED NERVOUS, BUT there was slightly more purpose in his step. The others were straight-faced and serious. A door ahead of them opened, and a man who Rowan recognised as a professional football player stepped out. The newcomer scanned the group until his gaze fell on the Ifrit. Molten orbs bore down on the human, and his mouth fell open.

Before he could shout or scream, Cam turned his violet eyes on the athlete, and Rowan watched, amazed, as the man's features slackened, and a beatific glow filled his face. The man nodded at them as he walked off towards the lift as

if nothing had happened. Rowan's hackles rose at the demonstration of power from the Elf. Cam kept walking as if nothing had happened, and he took them to another door farther along the corridor.

'Creepy, huh?' Jason asked Rowan in a whisper. Rowan could only nod. Cam stopped in front of a wide, imposing door and knocked. It was opened a moment later by a tall man who looked to be about the same age as Cam.

'Hello, Father,' Cam said.

'That's his dad?' Sergei muttered. 'Looks more like his brother.'

Manannán's eyes settled on the Ifrit. 'What is that doing here?' he asked. His voice was pleasant enough, but it held a strained element that he couldn't quite hide.

'He is a friend of Grímnir's, Father. He's with us.' There was steel in Cam's voice. Manannán turned his eyes back to his son and raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

After a second of cold scrutiny, Manannán looked back to the Ifrit. 'If my son vouches for you, Ifrit, then that is good enough for me. Come in. All of you, come in.' He stepped back to allow the group access. Cam looked slightly nonplussed by his father's words, but he rallied quickly.

The apartment was huge and spacious, and tastefully decorated in pastel greens and whites. It had a definite forest theme, and Rowan instinctively understood how much it must cost a creature like Manannán to live in the city.

A large, expensive-looking stereo system and a powerful-looking computer sat in one corner. Otherwise, the interior design consisted of landscapes and natural fibres. It was very peaceful.

'Sit down, all of you,' Manannán said, directing the group to a large bank of cream coloured sofas set around a low, glass coffee table. Books and newspapers were stacked on it neatly. 'Would you like anything to drink? Tea, coffee, something stronger perhaps?'

'I'll have a beer,' Cam said immediately.

'Maybe you should have a coffee,' Manannán said, slightly condescendingly. Cam seemed to shrink. Rowan felt sorry for him.

'I'll have a beer if Cam's having one,' he said, earning a reproachful look

from the Elf's father.

'I could go for a beer,' Jason said wearily. Sergei and the spotter echoed the calls.

'Five beers it is, then,' Manannán said with a smile, the tension suddenly vanishing. 'And you, my friend? What can I get for you?' he asked the Ifrit.

'A cup of tea would be most pleasant,' he growled.

'Milk? Sugar?'

'Yes, please ... two sugars.'

The drinks were prepared, and Cam gulped half his beer down in one go. He sighed ecstatically and raised the bottle back to his lips to finish it. Rowan saw his eyes meet his father's; he turned the gulp into an embarrassed sip and proceeded to nurse the bottle protectively.

'Now the niceties are complete, perhaps we could get to the business behind this evening's confab?'

Rowan listened incredulously as Cam told of the zombie Elves, and how he had found the Tattooist, as he called him, and lost his two companions, one of whom was the tattooed man that Jason believed to be so important. Manannán listened, poker faced, until Cam began to talk about his trip through The Tower at Dusk.

At this point, Manannán blanched, and he turned on the Tattooist angrily. 'You took him into the Unseelie Court? Are you mad?'

'Just listen, Manannán Ó Gríobhtha,' the Tattooist said. 'Your son is a credit to you; you should hear his story.'

After a second, Cam went on with his tale. He told it in a quiet, matter-of-fact way that added weight to his words. Rowan listened with mounting incredulity as he told of his brush with the vampire woman, and how he had defeated her with a sword, of all things. Then the climb around The Tower and how he was knocked off a balcony before taking something called a Creachmhaoil hostage.

Rowan felt a stab of admiration for the man – he was beginning to think of the Elf as human, he realised – when he heard how they came back through a mob of Ifrit to escape around a Fairy-Ring. No wonder having a machine gun

pointed at him had seemed like small potatoes.

Manannán stared at his son with a fierce pride. When he finished, his father said two words, but they obviously meant a lot to Cam because he flushed. ‘Well done.’ He turned to the group of humans. ‘And where do you come into all of this?’

Slowly at first, then quicker until it was spilling out in a rush, Rowan told the Elf what had happened to him since he came home on leave. He explained that after his sister’s husband was bitten, Sam had changed. So much so, that when Mark decapitated him, his body had grown back.

Sergei explained about the massacre in the hotel room, and Jason filled in some background about the mysterious Mark Jones. Rowan then went on to tell them what he had seen in the old Mayfield Station, and how his sister had been kidnapped again, this time with Mark.

Manannán was particularly interested in the descriptions of the shape-shifting things and the monsters in the station. He then questioned Cam about the conversation he had overheard between Creachmhaoil and the vampire. Cam insisted that it had been gibberish, but Manannán kept pressing him.

‘I don’t know ... something about experiments on somebody: something about shape-shifters and reproducing a spell. They need Grímnir and Cú Roí for this spell. And they’ve got a captive that the Satyr wouldn’t be happy about in ... Kel ... Kal ... Colminhey? Something like that – Colminhey’s House?’

‘Kilmanoi’s Hall.’

‘Yeah, that’s it. He’s got somebody ...’ Cam’s eyes suddenly widened as he remembered something. ‘The Maiden. He said he controlled the Maiden.’

‘In Kilmanoi’s Hall,’ Manannán said grimly.

‘Where’s that?’ Rowan asked. ‘In this Tower at Dusk?’

‘No – it exists in both Towers, in the very lowest explored level. There is a room there. It is a bad place.’

‘They said something about the Blind Room.’

‘It is as I feared. The Blind Room is different in each Tower. The Maiden will be there, in The Tower at Dawn. It is the only place that she could be imprisoned.’

‘Where the zombies are?’ Cam asked wearily.

‘Yes,’ Manannán said. He had been standing throughout the conversation, but now he perched on the arm of the sofa near to Cam. He leant forwards and picked up a newspaper from the coffee table. ‘I doubt any of you have been following the news over the last few days, but there has been a series of murders. Some of the humans who have died might have been magical. A fortune teller, a magician ... Cú Roí is feeding.’

‘His strength will grow quickly,’ the Tattooist said. ‘He must be stopped now.’

‘That’s easier said than done,’ Cam said. ‘Can you explain to me how humans have magic? The magic is dying.’

‘Our magic is dying,’ Manannán said. ‘The humans have their own power.’

‘Cú Roí is a freak of nature,’ the Tattooist interrupted, his powerful voice filling the room. ‘He held such potential ...’ For a moment the Tattooist sounded almost wistful.

‘It soon became apparent that he and those he spawned could bridge the magic of the land and the magic of the humans. At the time, it did not seem important, for the magic of the land was so much stronger than that of man. It was a curiosity, little more.

‘In later years, when we realised that our magic was being slowly destroyed, the legend of Cú Roí became a rallying point for many, the most prominent of whom is your Creachmhaoil. He saw in the legend a solution: a means of tapping into the human magic. A means of survival. He called it “evolution”.’ The Tattooist snorted derisively. ‘It was all academic – the Miracle Child was long gone. Destroyed, it was believed, by Grímnir five hundred years earlier.’

‘Why?’ Rowan asked. ‘Why was he killed?’

The Tattooist turned baleful, flaming eyes on the human. After a second he answered. ‘Cú Roí was insane. His lust for power was all-consuming. He spawned an army of monsters – hellhounds, dragons, and shapeshifters: a new race he called the Therians. They were expelled from The Tower and swept the world in blood and death.

‘Entire races of humans were sacrificed to Cú Roí, to feed him power. Many

of your legends of demons and devils and werewolves have their origins in that time. While he restricted himself to the human world, we saw fit to leave him be. His power grew though, and when he again threatened The Towers, the Courts united to exterminate him and his kind. A sword was forged, a warrior was trained ...’

‘The monster was cast out,’ Manannán continued when the Tattooist trailed off. ‘It was only later, with the rise of Rome, that the Courts realised exactly how vulnerable they were. There had been many civilisations in the past – the Egyptians, the Aztecs – but they had been more attuned with nature. The Romans were the first to start covering the land in earnest. As the roads were laid down and the cities rose up, our magic began to die.’

The Tattooist re-joined the conversation. ‘The Maiden was aware of two things. Firstly, that Cú Roí had not perished. She had seen his last moments: not killed but banished through a portal. She was unwilling to create panic by informing the Courts that their adversary had only been temporarily ... mislaid. I, too, knew that Cú Roí was not dead. Just absent. But as long as he wasn’t threatening us, I thought it good enough. The Maiden theorised that Cú Roí would return and we would be too weak to defend ourselves. She shared her theory with me. I ignored her.

‘The Maiden knew her magic was fading. She knew that when Cú Roí returned she might not be powerful enough to fight him. With this in mind, she hid the greater part of her power away, where it would be safe. She called it the Seed: a vessel of power not subject to the changing reality of the world.’

‘Where did she hide it?’ Jim asked.

‘Nobody knows but the Maiden.’ The Tattooist hung his head. ‘I failed her.’

‘Every second we wait, Cú Roí grows stronger on the blood of man,’ said Manannán. ‘We cannot fight him without magic. Therefore, our goals are simple: we unite Grímnir with Camulus, and we find the Maiden and the Seed.’

‘Simple,’ Cam muttered.

‘Sarcasm has no place here, Camhlaidh,’ his father snapped. ‘We know that both Grímnir and the Maiden are in The Tower at Dawn. That is where we start.’

‘The Tower? Zombies and darkness? Wonderful! How do you know so much

about all this, anyway?’ Cam demanded angrily. ‘You weren’t even born.’

Manannán turned haughty eyes towards his son. ‘Have you not been listening, boy? The Maiden knew the beast would come back. She saw the portal, she knew he would return here, to this place. A guard was set to watch for him. That is the secret duty our family has held for almost two thousand years.’

Cam looked confused. ‘Family duty ... How come I didn’t know anything about it?’

‘Dow was to be my successor, Camhlaidh. You were deemed unfit.’ Cam stared at his father, open-mouthed. The quiet that followed quickly became uncomfortable.

Rowan filled the deathly silence. ‘What about my sister?’

‘We will do our best to save her,’ Manannán said gently, ‘but without Grímnir, there is no hope for any of us. Cú Roí is mating, and his spawn are to be feared. After the larval stage, they become terrible creatures of fire and air that are almost impossible to kill.’

‘I’ve seen them,’ Rowan said grimly.

‘You cannot,’ Manannán said sharply. ‘They take years to grow to their full size.’

‘I tell you; I’ve seen them. So, has Sergei ...’ He looked at the other man who nodded. ‘I told you about them earlier – great horrible things covered in tentacles ...’ he trailed off when Manannán began to laugh. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘The things you describe, my friend, they are the larval stage. They are babies.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Sergei muttered.

‘Time is of the essence – for your sister, Rowan, and for the world.’

MONDAY



DOW

Consciousness came slowly. Dow fought his way up from the depths of sleep. Rosy light filled a white room, and crisp sheets lay over him. His side hurt. Reaching down caused him to wince as he felt bandages tightening around the wound ... the chainsaw ... he had been exposed to the tainted blood of the Twisted! He was infected!

Fear almost paralysed him. Then he realised that he was coherent and clean. He was still alive. Slowly he relaxed and looked around. Grímnir sat in a chair at his bedside, apparently asleep. His hair was clean and pulled back in a ponytail, his beard braided correctly. He was wearing a fresh pair of faded jeans and the leather jacket he had left in the armoury. The tattoos around his neck stretched down across his bare chest. Ink had covered his wounds. At his side rested the chainsaw, polished and looking quite new.

Dow tried to speak but only a croak came out. It was enough to wake the Jötnar, who opened his eyes and smiled at the Elf. ‘Welcome back to the land of the living.’

‘The poison?’

Grímnir’s face clouded for a second. ‘It has been a little over ten hours. We do not know yet. The Tower’s best healers have done all they can. Master Creachmhaoil saw to it personally. They think I got the poison out, but only time

will tell.'

Dow changed the subject. 'So, we are back then? This is the top of The Tower?'

'Yes, my friend, we made it.'

Dow held his hand up and Grímnir clutched it. 'Thank you,' the Elf said.

Another form appeared at the doorway. 'Come, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir, young Dow needs his rest.' Master Creachmhaoil stepped into the room, and Dow smiled at his old mentor.

'It is good to see you, Master. I am afraid we failed you. We failed to find the Maiden.'

'Nonsense, my boy. You brought Grímnir Vafthrúdnir back to us, and that was all you were required to do. Although, he is needed elsewhere. He would not leave your side until he had seen you awake.' Master Creachmhaoil turned back to the Jötnar. 'Are you satisfied now that he is in good hands?'

'I am.'

'And are you satisfied that the Maiden is lost to us?'

'I am satisfied that the dark ways are too perilous, and too many, for me to find her quickly.'

'Then you must come with me and speak with the council. We must find another way to defeat Cú Roí.'

'The magic of my tattoos will not help your cause.'

Master Creachmhaoil waved a hand as if to bat the suggestion away. 'I am not asking for your permission to take the magic from you anymore, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir. I just want you to come with me. To help me. To help us: your strength and knowledge are essential in the fight against the Miracle Child.'

Grímnir looked at Dow who smiled at him weakly. 'Go with him, my friend – I'm safe enough here.'

ROWAN

ROWAN'S DREAMS WERE FITFUL, FULL OF CREEPING THINGS THAT DRIPPED SLIME and leered disturbingly through serrated teeth. Tabby was in them, first running from the monsters and then becoming one, her slight frame buckling and swelling, slave to an internal evil that eventually burst from her in blood and screams. Thankfully, he didn't remember much more.

Wakefulness did not bring respite. The news channels talked with morbid glee of another murder. Last night, a man in the city centre had fallen prey to the most celebrated serial killer since Peter Sutcliffe. They were looping shaky footage of a tired-looking detective at the scene of the killing.

'Inspector! Inspector!' a female voice shouted. 'This is the fifth murder in two days. They're calling the killer a vampire! They say there was no blood in any of the bodies!'

'Of course there wasn't any blood in the bodies,' the detective answered irritably. 'It was all over the floor. He's a cannibalistic psychopath, but there's nothing supernatural about it.'

There's a good chance that man is going to lose his job, Rowan thought. He turned the television off with a grimace of disgust, amazed once again by how his race could relish the gory details of another person's bloody and vicious demise. They had no idea what was coming, he thought to himself grimly.

Rowan, and the odd assortment of fairies and humans he had fallen in with, stayed the night at Manannán's apartment. Only Sergei insisted on going across the road to a hotel. He let himself out, saying he would be back at five o'clock the following morning. It was now six and there was no sign of Sergei. Rowan wouldn't have blamed him if he never came back.

Jason and Jim were in the kitchen brewing strong coffee. The door to the guest room where Cam and the Tattooist slept was firmly shut. Rowan didn't fancy opening it, just in case he woke them suddenly and a rogue thought left

him flash-fried, or believing he was a chicken. Manannán's door was open and his bed was neat, as if it hadn't been slept in.

Outside it was still dark. The winter sucked all the life from the city, leaving it a stark and barren place. Sparkling frost, lit beneath the streetlamps, covered everything. The first signs of life were beginning to appear – menial workers going to cleaning jobs, and lonely cars drifting into town from Trinity Way. Rowan rubbed his tired eyes. The few hours' sleep he managed to snatch would not be nearly enough for the day ahead. Time was at a premium though, and it was all he could afford.

Behind him a door opened, and he turned to find the Tattooist stepping into the lounge area. Cam staggered out behind him, half naked and half asleep. The Elf didn't even look up; he just wandered towards the bathroom, scratching at his crotch in a very un-Elflike manner. Rowan turned and smiled at the Tattooist, thinking to share the strange sight. The Ifrit's face might have been carved from stone for all the response he got. Flaming orbs sputtered in his direction, and after a second Rowan turned away, feeling uneasy.

Jason called across the room to the Tattooist. 'Tea, isn't it? Milk, two sugars?'

This time the Tattooist did smile. 'Most civil of you, yes,' he rumbled as he stalked across to the breakfast bar. Jason handed him a mug, and the Tattooist sat himself down on a stool. Bemused, Rowan shook his head and made his way over. He poured himself a cup of coffee. They drank in silence.

The sound of a key scraping in its hole was loud in the relative quiet of the lounge. The front door opened, and Manannán walked in carrying two large duffel bags. They bulged and clinked ominously. He dropped them in the centre of the room, next to the bag of ammunition Rowan had brought up from the car after they had finished talking the night before.

'More guns,' the Elf said. Rowan stared at the bags for a moment and then looked down into his mug and thought of his sister.

THE SYLPH

THE SYLPH WAS A CREATION OF WILL AND SHADOW, LITTLE MORE THAN A DREAM of its Master, imbued of its Master's desire. Though autonomous and possessed of basic intelligence, its small life was an extension of the Prince of Rattlesnake's, and as such, it lived solely to obey him.

Its mission was twofold. The priority: to discover the location of Cú Roí and return to its Master with the information. Its secondary task, when the time was right, was to destroy Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha and any other sentient life that knew of the Miracle Child's return.

The Sylph was cunning. It knew its best hope of finding Cú Roí was through the Elf. With this firmly entrenched in what passed for its mind, it had stuck to the shadows, following the Elf and its new companions and waiting to see what it could learn.

When the small party had split up, with the dour human leaving the rooms of this small tower, the Sylph stayed with Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha. This had been a simple choice: Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha was the target. It must not lose the target.

It had lurked in the corners of the room as they slept. Its form consisted of nothing but motes of darkness hanging in shadow; its ability to hide in this manner was inherited from its Master. When it skittered out into soft moonlight that crept through an uncurtained window, its body solidified against its will as the illumination forced its ethereal body into tangible mass.

As it hung over Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha like a giant spider, one of its eight limbs stretched out into a spiny barb that hovered over the sleeping Elf's eye. The Sylph fought the insane desire to kill. For a second, the young Elf's life hung in the balance, as instruction nearly gave way to murderous rage, and then it skittered back into a corner. Out of the light, its form faded to nothingness.

Now it lay dormant in the dark space under a sofa in the lounge, patiently listening to the group, absorbing their plans and waiting for the moment it could reveal itself. Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha would die, as would all the creatures in this

tiny tower. They would die in shrieking agony, but not until they had led the Sylph to the Miracle Child.

Camhlaidh

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR ROUSED CAM FROM WHERE HE RUMMAGED THROUGH THE bags of guns and ammunition. He was looking for something to complement the Remington. He had become quite fond of the shotgun and still had plenty of shells left for it, but he felt that under the circumstances, he couldn't really go wrong with more firepower. Eighties action-movie firepower – the sort of ridiculous personal armament Arnold Schwarzenegger might strap on to single-handedly invade Russia. Nothing caught his eye though, and the weaponry really was rather heavy when all was said and done. Cam stood up and stretched. His back cracked in pleasant pain. The knock came again.

He glanced around as he walked over to the door. Rowan was loading some sort of big machine gun – an assault rifle perhaps. Jason and Jim had both grabbed similar weapons, and the snick of bolts and the click of magazines filled the room. His father was sharpening a sword. The Tattooist watched disdainfully, sipping his third cup of tea. His two evil-looking meat cleavers rested on the breakfast bar next to him.

On the other side of the peephole was a pale, drawn face. Cam began to smile when he saw that it was Sergei. He pulled open the door. 'Finally managed to drag yourself back up here, then? I didn't think you'd show – this is some wild ...' The words petered out as he realised there were other figures in the hall with Sergei. Only one was bipedal.

Cam lashed out with one foot, trying desperately to close the door. It was useless. A Barghest crunched past him, its wormy body writhing, its oval mouth gnashing and growling. Cam was knocked to the floor. He rolled to his feet and

scurried towards his shotgun, scooping it up as he passed. The deafening staccato chatter of automatic gunfire sent his senses reeling.

The Barghest absorbed the bullets like a dog taking bee stings. It roared and leapt in the air, its body flaring out into a web of flailing tendrils. Its huge maw snapped left and right at its invisible tormentor, and then it settled back into itself, none the worse for wear but looking very, very angry.

Two more stalked into the room, followed by a tall, wiry man with dishevelled brown hair and a mad look in his eyes. 'Sam,' Rowan spat.

'Hello, hello,' Sam cried like a ringmaster, welcoming a paying crowd to his circus. 'I hope you had a good breakfast, because it's time to die!'

ROWAN

ROWAN WATCHED AS THE TATTOOIST TOSSED ONE OF THE BARGHEST THROUGH A window, smashing the double reinforced glass as if it were spun from sugar. Another Barghest threw itself onto the big Ifrit's back. Rowan unleashed a stream of high-velocity bullets into its squirming flesh. It reared backwards, and the Tattooist managed to turn and slam a white-hot meat cleaver into the thing's mouth.

The third Barghest was being kept at bay by Jason, Jim, and Cam, all firing into its body and making it twist and jerk like a marionette. Manannán faced Sam, his sword held out before him in a steady, business-like manner. There was no sign of Sergei, the traitorous bastard.

Rowan turned back to the Tattooist and saw that the Barghest had a string of tentacles wrapped around the Ifrit's body and throat. The cleavers flashed out to sever them but more writhed out, until he was wrapped in the slimy mess. With a cry of fear and rage, Rowan jumped towards them and opened up with the

assault rifle.

Camhlaidh

CAM HAD EMPTIED EIGHT SHELLS INTO THE FIRST BARGHEST THAT CAME through the door. Though it twitched and screeched as bits of tentacles flew into corners of the room, it didn't seem to make much difference. Jason and Jim had joined in the firefight, and together they had managed to keep it off balance, but it was still very much alive.

As Cam stepped back to reload, he took a quick look around. The Tattooist was wrestling with one of the Barghest next to a broken window, and Rowan was emptying a gun into its exposed side. His father was keeping the man called Sam at bay with his sword, the point flicking out expertly whenever the other man got in range. A scream made him turn back to the first Barghest. Cam watched, aghast, as it impaled Jim: one clawed tentacle rammed through his throat and dragged him towards the thing's mouth. The massive, malleable jaw closed on Jim's head, bursting it in a spray of blood and brains. Jason bellowed in rage and emptied his gun into the thing. Cam frantically reloaded his shotgun, but it was too late; Jason had left himself wide open, and three tentacles smashed into his body. The first impaled him through his sternum and exploded out of his back, whilst the second and third drove into his stomach together.

Jason opened his mouth, and a jet of blood fountained into the air. The tentacles in his stomach lashed from side to side, causing the man's bowels to slide from his abdomen in a steaming heap. The Barghest roared in victory, spreading its tentacles around it like a peacock's tail. The action tore Jason in half. His lower body flopped raggedly beside Jim's decapitated corpse, and the top half of his torso slipped from the impaling tentacle onto the sofa and sat there propped up, for all the world as if Jason had sat down to tea.

Bellowing with horror and anger, Cam shot the next eight shells into the thing's bloodstained mouth. It turned to face him as the breach clicked empty.

Samuel

SAM WAS ENJOYING HIMSELF. ONE OF THE BARGHEST HAD TAKEN AN IMPROMPTU flying lesson, but other than that, things were going swimmingly. Two of the humans were already dead, and they'd only been in the room for thirty seconds. The big circus freak with the meat cleavers didn't look to be doing so well, and Sam was about to kill a slim chap with a sword who was trying rather ineffectually to impale him. It would only be a second before the fop with the shotgun was well and truly eaten, and Sam decided that he would deal with Rowan himself.

Dodging the edge of the sword almost languidly, Sam turned his attention back to his opponent. He was quick and lithe, and handled the weapon as if it didn't weigh a thing. Sam knew he could take him – knew he would kill him. He was just having a bit of trouble deciding exactly how.

THE SYLPH

THE SYLPH WAS CONFUSED. IT DID NOT KNOW WHAT THE THINGS THAT WERE attacking Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha were, but it knew that they must not kill the Elf. If the Sylph had been even a little more intelligent, it might have realised that the tentacled creatures and the man with them could take it directly to Cú

Roí, but it was a simple thing, and as such, it reacted instinctively to the threat.

As the Barghest darted in towards Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha, the Sylph oozed from beneath the sofa. Where light hit the shifting weave of its form, it became solid. Its limbs thrashed wildly as it fought to completely emerge from the darkness.

ROWAN

THROWING THE EMPTY HK416 TO ONE SIDE, ROWAN TURNED BACK TO THE centre of the room to look for something else to use against the seemingly unkillable Barghest. The Tattooist was still struggling with the thing, his immense strength and flaming eyes holding it in a snapping stalemate. Rowan found the bags of guns in the centre of the room by the sofas.

There – he leapt towards a flare gun that was lying beside a box of 5.56x45mm cartridges for the Heckler & Koch assault rifles. Even as he moved, Rowan realised something wasn't right. The shadow beneath the sofa was too long ... and it was moving.

Samuel

SAM HEARD THE UNEARTHLY CRY OF THE SYLPH AND TURNED TO FACE IT without thinking. The werewolf saw something strange, even by the standards of the last few days.

A shadow was condensing into black fury. At first, he thought it was the third Barghest, for it looked similar with its thick body and the multitude of legs, which writhed around it without rhyme or physical reason. He quickly realised it was something different again.

It was more arachnid than cephalopod; its black limbs clawed furiously at the floor as it dragged itself from the impossibly narrow space beneath the couch. Its body was a globe of viscous black liquid held together by some unknown force; its surface rippled uncertainly as the powerful legs finally found purchase and brought it into the room. It was bigger than a Barghest. The joints of its long legs almost brushed the ceiling before sweeping down into squat, phallus-like tips that seared the floor where they touched. It was all black and featureless.

One limb elongated fluidly to touch the Barghest that was about to fall on the Elf with the shotgun. The black substance immediately rushed out to cover the Barghest in a thick tarry carapace. The black monstrosity skittered over and dropped onto the trapped monster, absorbing it and the limb with such speed, that Sam barely believed what he had seen.

Another limb sprouted from the back of the thing and hooked down to the floor. Of the Barghest there was no sign. Sam's concentration was jerked back to his opponent when the tip of the Elf's sword slammed into his back.

Camhlaidh

CAM STARED AT THE CREATURE, WHICH HAD ERUPTED FROM NOWHERE TO SAVE him, with a mixture of fear and relief. Although there was no way of telling where the thing was looking, Cam had the unpleasant sensation that it was looking at him, and that it did not like him very much.

Cam scampered backwards and began to load more shells into his shotgun.

ROWAN

QUICKLY GETTING OVER THE SIGHT IN FRONT OF HIM – AFTER ALL, WHAT WAS one more terrifying impossibility – Rowan scooped up the flare gun and turned back to the Barghest that had the Tattooist wrapped in its tentacles. He fired, hitting the Barghest in the thick core of its body. The round burned red and began to smoke; the choking fog quickly filled the room. After that, things became confused.

Screeching, the Barghest released the Tattooist as the flare in its back began to flame in earnest. Rowan heard another cry and turned to see Manannán being mauled by a giant wolf thing. It had his head firmly clutched between its massive jaws. A sword jutted out of the wolf's back, but it didn't seem to care. The werewolf stabbed long talons into the Elf's stomach and ripped them up to his chest. Manannán's body briefly spasmed. Viscera slopped from his body cavity to the floor. Rowan knew that Manannán was dead: nobody could survive being gutted like that.

The monstrous black thing that had crawled from beneath the sofa skittered towards the werewolf. Sam saw it coming and released his grip on Manannán, who slumped lifelessly to the floor. Sam awkwardly clawed the sword from his body and threw it at the black thing before dodging past it and bounding out the door.

On the other side of the room, the flaming Barghest lashed out in a frenzy, and its tentacles ripped through the Tattooist. Fire erupted from the Ifrit's wounds to engulf the monster. It tried to flee, charging straight into a wall where it collapsed and slowly burned.

Rowan looked around. The black thing was gone. Cam was cradling his father's dead body. The Tattooist lay on the floor with a gaping hole in his

stomach that smouldered dully. ‘Jesus Christ,’ Rowan said helplessly as he bent over the Ifrit. He tried to lift him, but he was too heavy.

‘No,’ the Ifrit growled. ‘I am finished.’

‘A little scratch like that? Nonsense. Now get to your feet.’

‘I am finished. The monster’s tentacles punctured deep. Its venom is eating me. The fire of my life is dying. Bring me the Elf before it is too late.’

‘Manannán’s dead.’

‘I know that, fool – bring me the other one. Bring me his son.’

Rowan went over to where Cam sat on the floor with his father’s corpse in his lap. His face was expressionless, his eyes dry. ‘The Tattooist is dying.’ Cam looked at him blankly. ‘He wants to speak with you, Cam.’

Camhlaidh

IT DIDN’T SEEM REAL. HIS FATHER WAS DEAD. HE HAD BEEN RIPPED OPEN FROM navel to sternum. There were punctures around his face. Teeth marks. Cam stared at the man’s youthful face, realising for the first time exactly what he had lost. His childish recalcitrance: his stubborn refusal to be part of the Elfin Court had denied him the time he wanted – needed – with his father. There would be no return for the prodigal now. His petty rebellion would not be forgiven and forgotten. He would never earn his father’s respect; he would never take his place at his dad’s side.

Something broke inside him, then. Tears formed at the corner of one perfect eye, but they did not fall. There was a buzzing in his ear, but he did not hear it. Manannán Ó Gríobhtha was dead, his son a disappointment to him, his life a broken thing of childish memory. Cam had never sat down with him, listened to him speak about his long life, about his mother, about his hopes.

‘I thought there was more time,’ Cam said aloud, to nobody in particular. ‘I

thought ...' he trailed off. There was more buzzing in his ear. Something fell heavily on his shoulder. He shrugged it away angrily. 'I love you,' he said to the corpse, at the same moment realising that those words could never be reciprocated. Something dragged him around. He opened his mouth to protest, but a stinging sensation swept across his left cheek.

Rowan stood above him. 'You slapped me,' Cam said dully.

'The Tattooist needs to speak with you.'

Cam submitted meekly to being dragged over to where the dying Ifrit lay. The creature's abdomen was a wide pit of ash and molten rock. The heat was immense. Its flaming eyes were starting to fade away.

'You are the only one left, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha, in whom I can trust. In any case, you are the only one close enough to receive my gift.' The Tattooist's voice was hoarse. Death rattled deep within it. Cam stared at him. 'This is not how I would have had it – you are a child far out of his depths, but you are all I have to work with. Yet, you have shown bravery and resourcefulness, and beneath your complaints and your petulance, I believe you are a brave man. An honourable man. I trust you to do what is needed.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I ignored her. I squandered my power. Too late ... it was too late! Do you understand? I hoarded what was left for the last battle. For this time. For now. It's kept me alive, but I haven't used it. I should have done but ... I was scared. Scared of what it meant. Now it is for you. Do you understand?'

'Not a word,' Cam said numbly.

'You must find Grímnir, you must find the Maiden, you must destroy Cú Roí.' Cam opened his mouth to speak, though he did not know what he was going to say. He never got the chance, because the Ifrit's huge hand closed about his right wrist. The dying creature's grip was still powerful enough to make Cam yelp.

'Use the magic. Use it to get her back.' The pain began. It started beneath the Tattooist's palm and quickly spread. A burning agony ran up his arm and across the back of his shoulders, and then down his left arm and across the back of his hand. It felt like the flesh was being stripped away by an inferno. Cam screamed

then: he raised his face to the ceiling, and he screamed and screamed.

Then it was over. The Tattooist slumped back, dead. His body ignited and began to burn. The smoke from his corpse rose to merge with that of his smouldering killer. Cam fell to his side, hugging his arms to his body, convinced that the Ifrit had damaged him in some final malice. Slowly, he realised that the pain was gone. He sat up. Rowan was staring at his arms. Cam looked down.

A tattoo covered both limbs. It was a huge, wingless dragon, so realistic that Cam thought he could see it move. It shimmered in red, each scale minutely detailed, the coils of muscle beneath its skin almost tangible. Its realness was incredible.

His arm formed the trunk, the decoration wrapping completely around his forearm and bicep. Its wedge-shaped head covered the back of his hand, and its open mouth, with a throat red and ridged, dominated his palm. His index finger and little finger formed vicious fangs, and the other two completed an evil-looking snout. Black eyes glittered from his knuckles with wild intelligence, and his thumb formed its lower jaw.

The rest of its body appeared on his left arm; his flesh etched with the creature's scales. He turned his left forearm up to the light. Like the other, his arm formed the torso of the dragon. Its tail writhed down to cover the back of his left hand. He knew without looking that the dragon's body went up his shoulders and crossed the back of his neck, for that was where the burning had been.

'That's amazing,' Rowan said quietly. 'If I didn't know they were your arms, I'd say there was a big lizard hanging from your shirt sleeves.'

Cam didn't answer. He stared at his arms, then at the Tattooist's ashes, and then at his father. Then he stood resolutely and walked to the door.

'Where are you going?' Rowan asked.

'To get well and truly shit-faced,' Cam replied without looking back.

ROWAN

ROWAN DROPPED THE FLARE GUN AND LUNGED FORWARDS, GRABBING THE ELF BY the right arm. Cam turned and violet eyes bored into him.

He relaxed, wondering why he was holding Cam. The Elf's arm was very pretty, he thought to himself absently. That tattoo looked almost alive. His hand dropped to his side and he looked around. This was a nice apartment. Warmth flooded through his body, and Rowan smiled contentedly. A yawn rose from his gut, deep and lazy, and he let it roll out of his mouth. He raised his arms above his head and stretched. He was tired. The sofa looked very comfortable.

Stepping towards it, Rowan's foot nudged something. It looked like a gun. He frowned, thinking that a weapon should not be left on the floor. Stooping, he picked it up and carried it with him to the sofa.

Jason sat on the sofa staring at him. Rowan frowned. He could not sleep if Jason was sitting there – where would he lie? Rowan asked Jason if he could sit elsewhere. The man didn't reply. Rowan put the gun down, reached out, and shook his shoulder. Jason fell forwards and Rowan instinctively caught him. Jason was sticky. He smelled odd: coppery. There was something else in the air, now he thought about it. Burning? Yes, burning flesh and smoke and ...

Reality rushed back in as the Glamour faded. The unremitting carnage of the room snapped into focus. Rowan dropped what was left of Jason's corpse with a cry of disgust. Blood covered his hands and the front of his shirt. He snatched up the HK416 as he looked for Cam, angry that the Elf would twist his mind up at such a time, in such a place. Cam was gone. Grabbing as many clips as he could find, Rowan chased after him.

There were people in the hallway. They screamed and slammed their doors shut when they saw him. Rowan ignored them. The display above the lift showed it was already on its way down. Rowan ran for the stairwell and charged down the floors recklessly. He made the lobby in time to see Cam walking out

the front door, his shotgun slung casually over his right shoulder.

Aiming the HK416 at the Elf's back, Rowan was half-tempted to fire. Then he swore and ran after his last remaining ally. 'Cam,' he shouted. 'Cam, stop. I need to speak with you. This isn't what your dad would have wanted. What about Tabby? We've still got to find Tabby!' Cam walked out of the building without turning. Rowan went after him.

Outside was a scene of confusion, with a lot of flashing blue lights and a lot of police. Some of them stood protectively over a dead body. Some of them were armed. Rowan stopped and blinked. Cam walked through the cordon of cops sedately. One officer stepped aside to let him go, his face crinkling with confusion as he did it. Obviously, it was easy to walk from the scene of a massacre whilst holding a prohibited weapon – if you were an Elf.

As a human, Rowan found that he was not similarly blessed. 'Put the weapon down,' shouted a very angry-looking police officer who was pointing a gun straight at him. Rowan dropped the HK416 and followed the officer's instructions; he knelt on the ground and placed his hands behind his head.

He stared at Cam, and the Elf finally had the decency to look back over his shoulder. Their eyes met briefly before a scrum of police slammed into Rowan and pinned him to the ground.

MARK

LEACH HAD REPLACED THE TORCH SIX TIMES NOW. AT LEAST, MARK THOUGHT IT was six. It might have been more. The agony that crushed him when the sword stabbed into his body made his concentration waver. All Mark could really think about was getting free. Every time the silver metal of the blade cut him, Mark screamed and thrashed and pulled as hard as he could at his right hand.

It had taken a long time, but it was almost out. It hurt a lot; the flesh around the heel of his hand split and tore with the violent tugs. The skin re-formed

instantly until the manacles were almost a part of him. Each time he yanked chunks of meat were scythed away to fall to the floor. Leach apparently hadn't noticed. Or just didn't care.

When the pale man had returned from whatever errand he'd needed to run, he had pulled the sword from Mark's body and become sadistically experimental. With the blade, Leach explored every one of his orifices; Mark felt it in his anus, tasted it at the back of his throat, and saw its tip flash into each eye. Leach cut out his tongue, sheared away his penis, and chopped off his fingers, feet, legs, and ears. He placed the sword between Mark's teeth and split his face into a gaping smile, then punched out his teeth with the pommel and smashed them with the razor edge after they grew back. In a frenzy, Leach smashed open his skull and tied his entrails around his throat to choke him. For one gruesome hour, he forced Mark to watch him go about his work whilst wearing his face; the monster had carefully sliced it off during a particularly painful fifteen minutes. Each time he inflicted a new insanity upon his prisoner, Leach stood back and watched body parts and flesh regenerate with fascination. Then he kicked Mark's sundered body parts into a growing pile in the corner of the room and started all over again.

The sword rammed back into his gut, and Leach jerked it from side to side to open a wound in Mark's abdomen. Mark pulled his hand one more time. Skin ripped and came off like a glove. The bones in his fingers cracked and broke, and the limp, bloody thing that had been his hand slid free. Mark's toes touched the floor. His hand straightened and healed. Clenching his fist, Mark brought it down as hard as he could onto the top of Leach's head. The pale man's rubbery skull gave slightly, as if there was no bone beneath the brittle hair. Mark lashed out with his feet and Leach fell backwards, leaving Camulus behind in Mark's gut.

Reaching down, Mark pulled the weapon free and lashed it towards Leach, who stumbled back out of reach of the weapon. Mark stood and glared at the pale man. 'Come over here, you freak, and we'll see how you like having this thing crammed up your arse!'

Leach stared at him blankly and held his ground. Mark got the

uncomfortable feeling that Leach was weighing up exactly how to get at him, like a cat with a slightly irritable canary. With his left hand still securely manacled, Mark was trapped. The sword was surprisingly light. He waved it at Leach again. The man didn't even blink.

After a few seconds of stalemate, Leach began to undress. Mark stared at him, nonplussed. Leach pulled off his shoes and laid them down carefully, side by side. Then he removed the ragged, dirty suit jacket and the equally fouled pants and placed them delicately on top of the shoes so they wouldn't get damp. He removed a shirt that had once been white and folded it neatly, laying it across his other clothes so that it, too, wouldn't touch the filthy floor. He seemed completely oblivious to the large quantities of Mark's blood that already stained it.

Once Leach was naked, Mark could see exactly how weird he really was. His bulbous head sat atop a thin, androgynous body without nipples or genitals, or any other definition or muscle tone. His hairless torso was a rubbery white mass, covered in veins that looked purple in the firelight. His long, thin legs were bent in too many different directions. Leach hissed. His open mouth was round and wide and rimmed with crooked, yellow teeth. Fully open, it was far too big for his head; it reminded Mark of the big worms he'd seen in the movie, *Dune*.

The similarity was even more pronounced when Leach began to change. He juddered, and his legs fused into one. His body engulfed his arms, and his torso began to elongate, reaching up to merge with his oversized head: his neck flattened out and flared slightly, forming a thick ridged saddle. What little hair the creature had disappeared, and his eyes and nose were consumed by blubber. Only the mouth remained. It became larger and rounder as his body stretched and began to thrash in white coils that glistened with slimy translucent mucus in the firelight. Thick veins throbbed angrily beneath marbled skin.

It had changed its shape in seconds. What was something roughly humanoid was now a giant worm with a cavernous black mouth, lined with barbed fangs. A third of its twenty-foot length weaved upright in front of Mark. Its trunk was barrel thick.

The thing darted its head in towards Mark, and he barely avoided it; he

twisted his body and stinking rubbery flesh slipped past his face. It knocked him sideways on the way back, and he briefly lost his footing. He swiped at it with the sword and left a long gash in its sickly flesh. Leach hissed and coiled backwards into a corner of the room.

Weighing up his options, Mark realised he would have to escape soon, or risk spending a large part of the next few days in the thing's intestinal tract. It began to wind its way around the room, looking for an opening. Mark turned with it, keeping the sword held out in front of him. The gash on the worm's body leaked a pale pink substance that might have been blood.

Leach darted in again. Mark jabbed at it and it withdrew quickly. It tried again, this time more successfully, leaving a couple of deep scratches down his thigh. The wounds healed instantly, but a numbness began to spread through the limb.

Venom: Mark remembered that Leach's bite had paralysed him in the garage. It only lasted a few minutes before his system purged it, but it had been long enough to tie him up. In this instance, it might last long enough for Leach to eat him. The head darted in again. Mark's dead leg threw him off balance, and it easily avoided his clumsy stroke. Nasty teeth scored his left arm. Almost immediately the limb began to tingle.

Mark did the only thing he could: he pulled the sword back over his head and swung it around as hard as he could. The ensorcelled blade swept through the flesh and bone of his left wrist as if they were soft cheese. Mark yelled and fell backwards, his numb leg giving out just as the worm lanced its head into the space his sword arm had occupied. Mark found himself lying directly beneath the huge creature, and he instinctively thrust the sword up.

Camulus pierced the flesh just below Leach's mouth and continued upwards into what passed for its brain. The monster emitted an inhuman, high-pitched squeal, and its coils thrashed madly for a second. Mark pulled the blade free and acrid goo came with it, slopping down over his upturned face, getting in his mouth and causing him to gag at the fishy tang.

Opening his eyes, Mark saw that Leach had reared up to its full height and was directly above him. He could tell it was dead, and for the briefest instance

he felt a surge of triumph. Then the creature's body toppled down on top of him, and he raised his arms uselessly against its crushing weight.

Samuel

SAM SIGHED WITH SATISFACTION AS HE WALKED. KILLING THE FAIRY – TEARING into its face and tasting the sweetness of its blood, so different from a human's – had aroused Sam sexually. He was back at the station looking for Annalise, wanting to use her body to satisfy his lusts.

He found her near the birthing pits. 'Where have you been?' she demanded. 'It is nearly time. The Master is tired of this filthy place.'

He grabbed her arm. 'Let's fuck.'

She snarled at him, her beautiful face momentarily twisting into its bestial counterpart, her golden eyes flashing dangerously. 'Let go of me, you fool. It is time. The Master calls us.'

'Let's fuck,' he said again. 'I need to fuck.'

'Go fuck yourself,' she spat and wrenched her arm free. Sam lashed out; the back of his hand smashed into her face and knocked her down onto one knee. She threw herself back at him, dragging him to the floor and straddling him.

'That's more like it,' he said with a leer.

She clambered off him. 'It is time. We rise.' She turned and walked away.

'You whore,' he shouted after her. 'I liked you better when you were human.' She ignored him and was soon out of sight.

Climbing to his feet, Sam felt the stiffness in his trousers. A smile rippled across his face, the skin changing and morphing in its wake. Fur and fangs replaced skin and teeth. Who else could he fuck? Why, his darling wife had not provided him with his conjugal rights in quite a while.

She was right where he left her. He sat at the side of the pit for a while and

listened to her cry, not bothering to look down. After a while, he spoke. ‘How are you, my Love?’

‘Sam?’

‘Who else?’

There was a pause. ‘You aren’t Sam.’

‘Of course I am. Your dear husband. Your true love. And guess what, lover; I’m horny.’

She began to laugh. ‘What’s so funny?’ he demanded.

‘Look at me,’ she said calmly. Then louder: ‘Look at me.’ Finally, she screamed; the noise rang in his ears. ‘Look at me!’ Sam looked down into the pit. Tabby’s stomach was distended and heavy, as if she were several months pregnant. ‘I don’t think your boss would like you playing with his leftovers.’

‘What happened?’ Sam demanded, jealousy surging through him.

‘What do you think happened, you idiot?’ Tabby asked, her voice suddenly dead. ‘He raped me. That’s what you had in mind when you brought me here, isn’t it? To be his toy?’

‘Well, yes, but ...’

‘But what?’ she interrupted. Sam had no reply. ‘I thought so,’ she said. ‘My Sam’s dead. That creature put a monster inside him the same as it put a monster inside me. Sam’s monster just came out first. It hurts me so much to have to listen to it speak with his voice; walk with his body. My Sam died on that street when his throat was torn out. Whatever you are, you aren’t him.’

The hurt in her voice touched something deep within Sam. ‘I am me, Tabby,’ he said. ‘I’m in here somewhere. It’s just that everything is so simple where I am. I’m immortal – do you know what that means? I can do anything I want, and I’ve got forever to do it.’

‘Sam didn’t care about that. Tell me something. Are you happy?’

‘What?’

‘It’s simple enough, Mr. Immortal: are you happy?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Why – tell me why.’

‘I’ve already told you. I’m going to live forever.’

‘That’s not happiness. That’s subsistence. Sam was happy. I was happy. We loved each other. I doubt you even know what the word means.’

‘I know ...’ But Sam realised he wasn’t so sure anymore. The feelings he had felt for Tabby were dull and unreal, and faintly ridiculous. ‘What’s love anyway? I have power!’

‘At what cost?’

‘You’re talking rubbish, woman. I’m a god. I’m ecstatic!’

‘Go away, Mr. Immortal.’

‘Fuck you, you fat slag. You’re nothing but meat.’ There was no answer. ‘I’m going to pull your spleen out through your fucking asshole. I don’t care what the Master stuffed in your whore belly.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said a voice from behind him. Sam swivelled and became aware of firelight. He had been so absorbed with Tabby that he hadn’t noticed the man walking up behind him. It was Mark Jones, carrying a sword and a flaming torch. He was naked, covered in filth and slime. Sam grunted. If he couldn’t fuck, then killing was the next best thing.

‘You’ll be the second person with a sword I’ve killed today,’ Sam said.

Jones simply stared at him. Sam let the change take him, feeling his limbs swell, reading the wolf’s desire in his forebrain – the desire to kill and eat. He threw himself forwards, one massive arm sweeping out to crush Jones’s skull. The man sidestepped and the sword flashed.

Pain hit Sam’s arm just below the elbow. The severed limb spun off into the muggy gloom. He regained his balance and faced the human. He looked down at his arm, waiting for it to grow back. Nothing happened. Blood began to gush from the wound. Slowly, the change slipped away from him.

‘What have you done?’ Sam demanded, fear in his voice.

‘Nothing’s truly immortal,’ Jones said quietly. ‘I’ve already killed Leach with this. I had to dig myself out from under his corpse. This weapon can hurt you, boy ... it can kill you. It’s easy to be tough when you have nothing to fear. Let’s see how tough you really are.’ He brought the sword up and advanced towards Sam.

Sam took a step backwards, confusion and fear squirming within him. His

arm was still missing, and blood was still spurting. He clutched at the stump with his other hand to try and stem the flow.

Rainbows danced on the surface of the sword. It glowed silver in the torch's flame. Sam realised he could die here. Turning, he ran away.

'I thought so.' Jones's voice followed him, quiet and contemptuous. Sam didn't care.

Adrian

ADRIAN MATHERS WAS NOT FEELING VERY WELL. HE WAS THE FIRST TO ADMIT that he spent far too much time propping up the bar in the Green Man and was reconciled to his status as a high-functioning alcoholic. He was, after all, a professor of Linguistics and Sociology at Manchester University: looking slightly ruffled and enjoying a drink was part of the job description! Besides, it was not like he had anybody to go home to. Not since Phoebe had left him.

Usually, Adrian did not get hangovers, but last night he had gotten particularly tipsy and decided to experiment with antifreeze. He suspected he had poisoned himself. He had not drunk much – only a single shot – but his stomach was churning, and his head was throbbing. Damn that idiot at the bar for putting the thought in his head! Damn himself for listening!

His morning commute had been unpleasant. In fact, he felt so under the weather that the thought of getting his connecting train and follow on bus along Oxford Road to his building was frankly abhorrent. Crammed into a peasant wagon? Probably with students! No, much better to walk. It was a twenty-five-minute stroll. Clear his head. Possibly risk a coffee. A black coffee. Yes, that would be just the ticket!

So, he walked out of Piccadilly Station just as a freak show emerged from the derelict building a little further along Fairfield Street. At first, Adrian thought that it was some sort of parade. Possibly a flash mobbing. He'd read about them

somewhere. Something to do with the Internet? Either way, he did what he usually did when confronted with something odd in the city centre: he ignored it.

A loud voice rose above the sound of morning traffic. ‘We rise!’ Oh great, Adrian thought; a bunch of religious nuts. Or protesters. He looked at his watch. It was eight o’clock. It was a bit early for this sort of thing, wasn’t it? Had these people got no sense of propriety? He looked around. His mouth dropped open. Walking towards him was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen – tall and blond with green eyes and a fantastic body. He could tell her body was fantastic because she was completely naked. Her breasts swung from side to side in a very provocative manner. Adrian gulped and hoped his pants could hide his erection.

Screaming jolted him from his unabashed staring. He looked around, and what he saw triggered a rush of adrenaline that dispelled his chemical hangover. Huge pink dogs were attacking people. No, not dogs, just dog shaped. Adrian moaned in fear and tried to run, but the naked woman caught him, her hands clutching him with incredible power.

‘You will see,’ she hissed at him. She smelled of sweat and damp, and her breath was an abattoir. She pulled his head around, and he watched as things with tentacles and wide mouths ripped the people on the street to bloody ribbons.

A giant in a green duffel coat appeared. *We rise!* The voice was everywhere and nowhere, impaling his head, vibrating in his gut, clutching his testicles, making him want to cry. The voice held madness and glory: madness and glory, which promised death and despair that would never, ever end.

‘We rise,’ the woman echoed sibilantly in his ear before she twisted his head off his neck.

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AFTER TWO BOTTLES OF WINE CAM THOUGHT HE MIGHT AT LEAST BE SLIGHTLY

drunk. Inebriation seemed to elude him though. He sat in the middle of the aisle in Spar, Piccadilly Gardens, while early morning shoppers stepped around him, beguiled by a Glamour, completely oblivious to the Elf in their midst.

The Glamour was stretched thin, and Cam knew that if many more people entered the shop, it would collapse. He was past caring. On some subconscious level, he wanted to get caught ... at least then it would all be over.

A security guard stood close by. 'Get me another bottle of wine,' Cam commanded him. The guard nodded happily and went to fetch Cam the alcohol. Cam twisted the cap off and took a couple of long, hard swallows. It was warm, but he didn't care. On reflection, he had done this all wrong – he should have gone straight for the spirits. He didn't want to change drinks now, though – he might get a hangover. He giggled to himself. Maybe he was getting drunk after all.

His shotgun lay on the floor next to him, and the small bag of ammunition was still slung over his shoulder. He wore the jeans and t-shirt he had taken from his father's closet before all hell broke loose that morning. There were two gashes on his face and a bite mark on his throat, all courtesy of the Svartálfar, and his arms were covered in that God-awful red dragon tattoo. His dad was dead, too. His dad who had replaced him with Dow. It had not been a good couple of days.

Drinking more wine, Cam conceded that Dow was a much better choice for guarding some ancient portal liable to cough up a monster or two every few thousand years. It still rankled, though. He was angry, too – angry that his father had died before Cam could prove him wrong. 'Selfish bastard,' Cam muttered.

It was all so unfair. Nothing had ever gone right for Cam. A confused-looking police officer stepped over his outstretched legs and picked up a pint of milk. It was a woman. She was kind of cute. She couldn't see him, though. He was an Elf, after all. He couldn't tell the humans about the Elves. No, couldn't do that. He could live amongst them, but he couldn't be one of them. Or he could live amongst the Elves but not live like one of them, because he was going to die in fifty years. What was the point in being immortal if you knew you were going to die in fifty years?

Maybe his father was right: maybe he was a failure. Look at all these people. They had no idea what was going on around them. Why should he risk his life to try and protect them? Maybe Cú Roí had it right: fairies for fairies, immortals for immortals. Kill the humans and start again. Not a bad idea.

Somebody screamed. It was the pretty female police officer. What's wrong with her? he thought. Not like there's a bloody zombie Elf in here. If they want to see something worth screaming about, how about a zombie Elf with its eyes hanging out on its cheekbones? Or a bloody vampire? Try looking down the throat of a Barghest, and then come screaming to me ...

Something round and hard smashed against the wall near Cam and rolled up the aisle to rest between his legs. It was a head. A human head. It looked very surprised. Not as surprised as Cam. He shouted in shock and scrambled to his feet, grasping the shotgun automatically. The Glamour fell away just as the pretty police officer and three other shoppers came running towards him.

Cam could imagine what they were seeing and was about to slam another Glamour into them when something large and pink crashed around the corner. It slipped on the polished floor, knocking a display of crisps everywhere. Tentacles looped up as the Barghest shrieked in rage, its wide worm's mouth opening to reveal massive fangs.

'Get behind me,' Cam shouted, pumping a round into the breach. The four humans quickly obeyed, deciding to ignore the fact that he was armed, surrounded by empty wine bottles, and – to them at least – had just materialised out of thin air. Cam emptied all eight rounds into the creature, knocking it from its feet and sending bits of tentacle flying everywhere. 'Is there another way out?' he called over his shoulder.

'This way,' the police officer replied. 'I think there's a loading bay or something.' The Barghest was forming into its more canine shape, tentacles writhing around each other to give it legs. Slowly, it pulled itself upright.

'Run,' Cam shouted.

It was a haphazard scamper down the aisle and into the storerooms. Cam slammed the door shut behind him just as the Barghest crashed into it, knocking it off its top hinge and warping it in its frame. They fled through a narrow rat-run

of crates and trolleys and tiny offices and emerged in front of a set of steel shutters. 'Open them,' Cam commanded the police officer as he quickly slotted another eight shells into the Remington.

'What makes you think the gun'll work this time?' asked one of the shoppers.

Cam turned to look at him. The speaker was a small man in a business suit. 'Have you got a better idea?'

'Are you drunk? You stink of alcohol. My God, you are drunk!' squawked the little man.

Cam stared at the man incredulously. 'So what?'

'I just don't think you should be holding a firearm while you're under the influence,' he said primly.

'Jesus Christ,' Cam muttered. He finished loading the shotgun and looked back the way they had come. The roars of the pursuing Barghest were getting louder.

'Look, all I'm saying,' insisted the little man, 'is that you can't fire a gun, drunk!'

'You'd be quite amazed at what I can do while I'm drunk,' Cam snapped. The man didn't answer. The sounds of the beast crashing after them were very close. 'Get back,' Cam said. The little man obliged. He could hear the shutters rising and risked a glance over his shoulder. It was going to be too late – they weren't rising fast enough.

Looking forwards, Cam raised the shotgun to point at the entrance just as the Barghest appeared. He emptied it again. The massive noise of the reports filled the small space, drowning out the clanking of the shutters and the screams of the humans. The Barghest absorbed the shots.

Slowly, it spread. Tentacles reached up to the ceiling, wrapping around pipes and outlets to support its weight. More tentacles whipped out to the side, unwrapping so that its shape disappeared into a twisting net of barbed arms: a web that hung suspended across the room with a thick, blind, sinewy nodule lurking at its centre, like a hunting spider. The solid thing at the centre opened a wide mouth crammed full of broken-glass fangs. Cam thought it might be

smiling.

‘What is it?’ asked the police officer. Cam could barely hear her through the ringing in his ears. Bloody shotgun.

‘It’s a Barghest,’ Cam shouted back. ‘It’s death. Now you’ve looked down its throat, I suppose we’re in it together.’ He didn’t know why he said it; maybe it was the booze, maybe it was facing a common enemy with these humans, maybe it was a subconscious desire to make his dead father proud.

Maybe – as he looked into the peacock flare of gristly carnage hanging in front of him and realised that it would probably kill him here – he understood that immortality wasn’t all that it had cracked up to be. It was living that counted, and in that moment, Cam felt truly alive.

‘It’s open,’ the little man shouted.

‘You go – I’ll hold it off as long as I can,’ Cam said.

‘Thank you,’ said the police officer. Then she was gone.

The Barghest saw its prey escaping. Its body tangled back up, and the skinned hyena reappeared in seconds. It took a step towards him.

‘Oh, no you don’t,’ Cam said. He dropped the shotgun and held his hand out in front of him in the universal sign for something to stop. He realised even as he did it that it was a faintly ridiculous thing to do, but it felt right.

Something tingled in his shoulder. The Barghest took another step and pain exploded deep in the core of his arm. Cam looked down at the tattoo on his hand. The dragon’s black eyes blinked. That was his only warning before incandescent fire ran up his arm and spewed out of his hand.

White-hot plasma lanced from his palm and hit the Barghest in the mouth. For a second it stood still, silhouetted by the burning radiance. Then it was gone, whipped away by the dragon fire.

Cam closed his fist instinctively, and the flames winked out of existence. The shop was a molten ruin, still too surprised to catch on fire. ‘Jesus,’ he whispered, staring at his hand. The tattoo looked no different than before: still incredibly lifelike, but thankfully, not moving. Smoke alarms went off and water started spraying everywhere.

‘Jesus, Mary, mother of Christ,’ he reiterated.

‘What the hell just happened?’ Cam turned and saw that the police officer was still inside, half crouched as if about to duck under the shutters.

‘Damned if I know,’ Cam said. He picked up his shotgun and quickly reloaded it.

‘What are you?’

Cam smiled, and for the first time, he knew that he could answer. ‘I’m an Elf, my dear. Now, I need to find a friend of mine, and I believe you have him in custody.’

MARK

SMASHING CAR WINDOWS IN MANCHESTER’S CITY CENTRE SHOULD HAVE BEEN A risky proposition, what with the number of people usually wandering around. However, the area around the Mayfield Station was deserted by anything other than corpses, birds and some adventurous rats. The rise of Cú Roí and his army of monsters had pretty much turned the city into a ghost town. Mark felt quite safe throwing a half brick onto an old Hyundai’s back seat.

The crash of the breaking glass broke the silence of the street. Mark didn’t know how the authorities were reacting, but he imagined there would be barricades all over the place. They’d probably say it was a chemical weapon attack – that’d keep most of the looters away and most of the residents inside.

Tabitha stood behind him with one arm wrapped under the obscene swelling of her belly. Too large to be natural, it was covered in thick purple veins. She was having difficulty standing up. She had come along quietly, not asking any questions as he helped drag her out of the pit and guide her to the entrance. The Mayfield Station was abandoned once again, apart from a couple of rotting, half-eaten corpses. Nothing had stopped them leaving.

Leaning into the broken window, Mark unlocked the driver’s door and got in. He was naked as well, and covered in the filth of his own faeces and what passed

for Leach's blood. He wasn't sure which smelled worse. Mark had toyed with the idea of putting on Leach's abandoned suit but couldn't bring himself to touch anything that had belonged to the abomination. He began to pull at the underside of the steering column.

'Do you know how to hot-wire it?' Tabitha asked quietly. She sounded faintly alarmed, as if being in the company of somebody who knew how to steal a car was somehow frightening. Mark felt like laughing. After a second, he realised that actually, he didn't feel like laughing at all.

The car's engine stuttered as it turned over. 'When you get to my age,' he said, getting out to help lower Tabitha into the back seat, 'there isn't very much you can't do. How are you feeling?' he asked as she settled herself.

'Like John Hurt with a really bad case of indigestion,' she said. Neither of them smiled. 'How old are you?' she asked as they began to drive away. Mark could sense she was eager to change the subject. For a second, he hesitated. Then he told her. There were a couple of minutes of silence. 'You're nearly two thousand years old?' she asked eventually.

'Yes.'

'Tell me,' she said, so he did. He told her all of it as he drove, not looking at her. Roadblocks had been set up along the way, but the police were only stopping people entering the city; the huge number of angry people trying to get in meant they didn't seem interested in stopping two people heading out.

'I have known you for almost two millennia, Tabitha,' he said as they pulled up outside the mansion. He helped her out of the back seat. 'I have fought for you, bled for you, killed for you ... and I have cried for you. Every fifty years, I cry for you. I have loved you for all that time, and my life is dedicated to yours. I try so hard to save you, and every time I fail. But not this time,' he said fiercely. 'Enough is enough, and I don't care what is in you, or what is after you: I will not let you die this time.'

Naked and filthy, Tabitha wrapped her arms awkwardly around him, her belly a barrier between them. Silently, she kissed him on the lips. She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. 'We'll see,' she said before walking unsteadily towards the front door, her hands supporting her massive stomach.

Mark watched her go, his heart breaking again as he realised that maybe she didn't want to live anymore. He collected Camulus and followed her. 'Let's get cleaned up, and I'll call a doctor,' he said as he opened the front door.

DOW

WHEN DOW WOKE NEXT, HE FOUND MASTER CREACHMHAOIL STOOD ABOVE HIM. Dow smiled at his old tutor.

'Hello, Dow. How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' Dow said, and realised that it was true. His side still hurt, but the agony had faded into a dull, throbbing ache. 'I feel good, considering.' He smiled again. Master Creachmhaoil smiled back. 'How long?' Dow asked.

'You were injured just over sixteen hours ago.'

'Sixteen hours?' Dow felt a wash of relief run through his body. He sighed. 'Then the infection didn't take? I made it? I'm going to live.'

'Yes, my boy,' Master Creachmhaoil said sadly. 'You will not become one of the Twisted – Grímnir Vafthrúdnir did enough to save you.'

'I am very lucky,' Dow said.

'Well, that's relative,' came a hollow voice from somewhere behind him. Dow twisted awkwardly in his sickbed. It was only then, with a rush of consternation, that he realised he was tied down.

'Why am I bound?'

'Well, we didn't know what was going to wake up, my boy,' Master Creachmhaoil said lightly. 'To be honest, this would have been a lot easier if you'd woken up dead. So much easier if you had succumbed to the disease.'

'What are you talking about?' Dow demanded. He began to struggle against the ropes that bound him. 'What's going on, Master Creachmhaoil? Who is that behind me?'

Master Creachmhaoil sat at the edge of Dow's bed and laid one hand against

his cheek in a fatherly manner. ‘You were my best student, my boy. I am so very proud of you.’ His fingers began to stroke Dow’s long hair. ‘You were like the son I never had. It pained me when you chose to go with Manannán Ó Gríobhtha, for I knew this day might come. So much easier if you had submitted to the disease.’

‘Get on with it, Creachmhaoil,’ the hollow voice whispered.

Sighing regretfully, Master Creachmhaoil stood and reached into his robes. He pulled out a short dagger with a leaf-shaped blade. It shone silver.

‘What are you doing?’ Dow shouted, panic threatening. He began to thrash around, desperate to free himself.

‘You have to die, my boy. I do this with a heavy heart, but you know too much, and if you live, you will ask awkward questions about Grímnir. Questions about where he has gone. You are very bright, Dow, and I am certain those questions would eventually lead you to truths that you would struggle to understand. No, it has to be this way. The Court will be told that you succumbed to the disease, and your body was burned. Which is half true.’

Dow stopped struggling, fatalism overwhelming him. He had been betrayed by one of the two men he trusted absolutely. ‘Why?’ he asked with a choke in his voice.

‘Immortality. Our kind are meant to live forever, Dow. I am one thousand and thirty-seven years old. The things I have seen, the knowledge I have ... I cannot die. I must not die. I will not die.’ His eyes finally met Dow’s. ‘I am scared of what might come next.’

‘You are scared that nothing comes next,’ said the hollow voice. ‘Get on with it, I am bored.’

Master Creachmhaoil ignored it. ‘I must not die, and therefore, I cannot let our race die. There is a way – I am certain of it – but I need magic. I have the Maiden, but she has done something – hidden her power somewhere. I believe it is in Grímnir Vafthrúdnir. I have them both now.’

‘Grímnir Vafthrúdnir walked into the Blind Room of his free will, believing it to be a council chamber. Not too bright, that one. It may explain his obstinacy. So now I have the power, and all I need is the template – the Miracle Child.’

When I have him, I will redesign our race and we will feed on the humans' power ... we will live. You understand, don't you Dow?'

'You're mad.'

Master Creachmhaoil's face twisted up with rage. He pushed the edge of the blade savagely against Dow's throat. 'I am not mad, boy. I am a visionary. We must evolve, just like Cú Roí evolved.'

'Cú Roí is a monster.'

'I do not condone his ethics, but his body – his body is perfect. We must have that.'

'How do you know this will even work? This is complete madness. The Court cannot have agreed to it.'

'It is not madness. And, of course, the Court knows nothing of it – they are senile and idiotic.'

'You risk everything for nothing – we cannot be altered in such a way. We cannot be ...' but even as he said it, Dow realised he was wrong. The truth hit him like a freight train. 'You deranged fucker,' he said quietly.

Master Creachmhaoil nodded sagely. 'As I said, you are very bright. I knew you'd put it together in the end. That is why you cannot live.'

Dow tried to reply but the knife had already sliced into his neck. He tried to breathe but couldn't; blood from his severed arteries was filling his lungs. Slowly his vision began to fade, but before it did, he saw the shadowy form of a Svartálfar step in front of him.

'Shame to let good blood go to waste,' said Damballah with a smile.

'I must decapitate him,' he heard Master Creachmhaoil say, as if from a long way away. 'To make it look right.'

Cold hands fastened around his neck. 'Leave it to me,' said the vampire.

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A WASTE GROUND OF DEAD PEOPLE AND BURNED-OUT VEHICLES SURROUNDED THE Beetham Tower. Some kind of fight – more like a battle really, Cam thought to himself – had occurred here, and it looked like a lot of police officers had come off terminally. A number of civilians didn't seem to have done too well, either. Cam sighed and ducked back behind the abandoned light-goods vehicle he'd been using as cover. Rowan was checking a handgun that he had taken from a dead cop.

He watched the human appraisingly for a moment. He seemed to know what he was doing with the weapon. Cam absently reached up over his shoulder and patted his shotgun to make sure it was still there.

Cam was happy to have Rowan along. Though Cam had never tried before, it turned out that breaking somebody out of police custody was remarkably easy. His rescue of Rowan had gone smoothly. He'd had to knock one idiot out because he already had the maximum number of people possible under his Glamour ... and then there had been that very irritated inspector who had tried to stop them just outside of the custody suite ... but mostly, it'd gone well. Before they left, Cam had used the Glamour to establish exactly what had happened in the city since the attack at his father's apartment.

A mesmerised sergeant at the police station had accessed an ancient-looking computer with even more ancient-looking software. They scanned through a list of incidents recorded by members of the public and police officers.

Reading the date-stamped logs and looking at the areas they had been reported from, it didn't take Rowan and Cam long to put together a basic picture of what had happened. When Cú Roí and his monsters burst from Mayfield Station in a flood of death, they continued to Piccadilly train station and ripped people to shreds. Those on the platforms above heard their screams and phoned the police. Several of those phone calls ended suddenly; Cam could envision what happened when a Barghest got into a confined space.

From there, the wave of violence gathered momentum, moving through the city in a roughly south-westerly direction. Here the reports became more frenzied. A man on Whitworth Street described a pink tentacled monster impaling people, before the line went suddenly dead. A young child on Portland

Street phoned from her mother's phone to say a man who looked like her doggy had just bitten her mummy, and that her mummy was not moving and had a lot of red. At the library, a woman phoned to whisper that a woman with yellow eyes and a face covered in blood was stalking her through the stacks. Nobody was quite sure what the scream she let loose before hanging up actually meant. Cam could imagine.

Hundreds of calls: people in the Great Northern Warehouse, barricaded into the cinema while great writhing monsters howled their hunger at them; a bunch of civil servants in the town hall watching as a 'werewolf' murdered two PCSOs in Albert Square and ate their remains; a homeless man reporting that something huge had just ripped his arm off and carried his girlfriend away; a road worker who was hiding in the hole he had just dug while his colleagues screamed above him; a taxi driver who crashed his car trying to escape a 'huge, skinned dog thing', only to find himself cornered by a whole bunch of them ... the list went on.

By nine-fifteen the streets were empty. The monsters had disappeared into the huge Beetham Tower on Deansgate. The calls coming from within it, terrified and brief. The police, completely unprepared for Cú Roí's invasion, had retreated from the square mile of the city centre and set up roadblocks to prevent anybody else going in. They were frantically requesting help from the army, the air force, the navy, the local paintballing club ... any bugger with a gun.

Crouching with his back against the side of the lorry outside the building, Cam wondered what they were going to do next. He still hadn't really had time to process the strange tattoo that covered his arm and could spit fire. Why had the Tattooist chosen him? Rowan would have been a much better choice for such a gift. Then again, Rowan wasn't of the Courts.

Where had such magic come from, anyway? There wasn't supposed to be any left. His father might have been able to explain it ... thoughts of his father caused Cam to close his eyes tightly. He wasn't ready to deal with that yet, either.

'Heads up,' Rowan hissed. Cam poked his head around the bonnet. A tall naked blonde woman was walking towards the main doors of the tower,

dragging another woman by the hair. The captive appeared to be either unconscious or dead.

As the naked woman approached, a huge Barghest emerged from the darkened foyer and growled at her. She growled back, the noise audible even from where Cam and Rowan hid. It was a bestial sound, full of threat and blood. The Barghest backed off, and the naked woman dragged her prize inside.

‘Look who’s with her,’ Rowan said grimly. Sergei was stalking behind the naked woman and her captive.

‘At least we know where he is,’ Cam replied coldly. ‘Did you get a good look at the woman they had?’

‘Yes. It wasn’t Tabby, thank God,’ Rowan said.

‘No – that bitch escaped,’ came a voice from behind them. Cam stiffened when he heard it. It was the voice of the creature that had murdered his father.

Samuel

SO FAR, IT HAD BEEN A BAD DAY. SAM’S ARM STILL HADN’T GROWN BACK, AND his fear when Jones faced him down with that awful weapon in his hands was still fresh in his memory.

After a few days of not having to fear anything – of having absolute certainty that he was inviolable – facing mortality had been a shocking, unmanning sensation. Sam did not like that he felt terror. He did not like it that he had run. He was upset that his immortality was not as complete as he had believed.

In short, like bullies everywhere, he was looking for a little payback, and it didn’t matter who he shit on to get it. As far as Sam was concerned, running into his brother-in-law and his glamour-model sidekick was just a bonus. Sam noted that Rowan’s companion had a shotgun sheathed on his back. Strangely, the pretty boy made no move to draw it.

‘What happened to your arm, Sam?’ Rowan asked as he stepped away from his friend, putting space between them.

Sam said, ‘Mark Jones took it.’ He glanced down at his stump and shrugged. The motion felt lopsided. ‘A minor bother. If anything, it saves me the inconvenience of tying it behind my back to deal with the two of you.’

The other man stared at him. A fierce hatred burned from his violet eyes. ‘You killed my father.’

Sam laughed with genuine humour. ‘My, my – melodramatics. I’ve killed a few men, now. I’ll kill some more. I’m going to kill you.’

‘He wasn’t a man. He was an Elf.’

‘An Elf? Yes, an Elf.’ Sam licked his lips. ‘That was why he tasted so sweet.’

The Elf began to take a step towards the werewolf, but Rowan put out an arm to stop him. ‘Where’s Tabby, Sam? Where’s my sister?’ he asked gently.

‘I’ve been looking for her, believe me.’ This was true. After his reason returned – after the awful fear in his stomach subsided and his remaining hand stopped shaking – he realised that Cú Roí would be very unhappy about losing Mark, Tabby, and Leach. Sam had felt it prudent to find the humans as soon as possible. At least then he could present Leach’s murderer to his Master.

He searched the area extensively, checking bodies – the victims of the Barghest – and partially eating some, but without any luck. He considered returning to the mansion but felt Cú Roí would be unhappy if he left the city centre. So, Sam decided to return to his Master to get orders. The pull in his head confirmed that his Master wanted him back.

‘When I find your sister, Rowan, I’m going to do things to her. Horrible things.’ He giggled.

‘You’re mad,’ Rowan said flatly.

‘No,’ Sam shouted, suddenly angry. ‘I am a god! Gods can’t be mad. Everything we do is right. Our will is the only truth, and our power the only justice!’

‘As far as I can see, you’re just the puppet. I’ve been paying attention, Sam, and you are just an animal, pushed and pulled by something else. Am I right?’ Rowan asked.

‘He doesn’t control me,’ Sam hissed.

‘He created you,’ the Elf said quietly. ‘He controls you.’

‘Where is he?’ Rowan asked. He pulled a gun from the small of his back and pointed it at Sam.

‘That’s pretty, where did you get it?’

‘There are a lot of very armed but very dead cops around the corner. Now, where is he?’

‘You made a mistake, brother dearest ...’ Sam allowed his rage and hatred to flow through him. In its wake, it brought dense muscle and bristling fur. His remaining arm swelled, his skull elongated, and through the pain, Sam felt a surge of ecstasy.

This was power, he thought as he shrieked into the morning sky, his cry turning to a roar. Slaver dripped onto his matted chest; his fingers cracked as long talons appeared. His mouth suddenly crowded with fangs and his senses sharpened. He could smell Rowan’s fear; he could see sweat beading on his brow.

‘... you brought a gun to a fist fight,’ Sam said, the words slurred and mangled in his wolf’s muzzle.

THE SYLPH

THE SYLPH LURKED IN THE DARKNESS BENEATH THE LORRY, AMONGST THE WIRES and filthy, oil-soaked shafts that criss-crossed its length. It waited patiently, still bound by its Master’s orders: still waiting to find Cú Roí, the Miracle Child.

So far, the Elf had done nothing to bring the Sylph’s objectives any closer. It was beginning to wonder, in its own stupid way, whether it should just dispatch the Elf and return to the Prince of Rattlesnakes.

Impatience and frustration sizzled through the liquid night that passed for its

psyche. It watched, its ephemeral body laced through the infinitesimal cracks that ran through the chassis, hiding in the engine and the exhaust, seeping into the darkness beneath the seats, filling the storage container on its back, edging onto the hard tarmac below.

It watched the one-armed Therian howl and change. ‘Your carcasses will be meat for the Barghest,’ the wolf thing grunted, its words garbled in its malformed jaws. ‘I’ll take your steaming, gutted corpses to my Master. It’s not far to carry you, even with one arm. The rooms of the apartment block over there will soon be filled with whores, each one with a belly stuffed full of my Master’s children. And he waits for his army to quicken right at the top of the tower. A fit seat of power for a living god!’

If the Sylph had possessed a mind capable of giving words to its feelings, it might have said ‘finally’ before it materialised to kill them all.

Samuel

THE LORRY BEHIND ROWAN AND THE ELF SUDDENLY LURCHED INTO THE AIR WITH a groan. Sam watched it, confused, as it hovered several feet off the ground for a second, before slowly collapsing backwards on to its side. The wailing grind of buckling steel set his hypersensitive ears ringing. He howled in sympathy.

Something crawled from the shadows beneath it. Something he had seen before. Thick, arachnid legs scrambled on the tarmac for purchase as the thing from the apartment dragged itself into the light once more. Rowan and the Elf ran to its side, out of the way of its whipping legs, which were big enough and powerful enough to tear them in half.

Thick black light wormed out of rents in the lorry’s engine block. Moments later, the cab and the container erupted, metal bursting outwards in thousands of different directions, like a spray of bullets. Darkness and shadow flowed from

the holes, running down to where the legs had finally managed to get themselves under the lorry.

For a second it looked like an enormous hermit crab, the lorry its shell. Then the legs straightened, and the lorry rolled away as if it weighed nothing.

Stretching in the light, the dark creature rose to its full height, rearing fifteen feet above them. Its body was a perfect black globe, its thick limbs sprouted from it in no particular pattern. Sam felt fear for the second time that day. Rowan fired the gun at it once. Nothing happened.

The Elf raised his right hand and pointed it at the dark creature. A brilliant stream of white-hot fire lanced into it, bursting on its legs, causing steam to erupt around it. The viscous terror reared back, leaving three of its legs behind. A noise came from it, like the crashing of waves on a beach, quiet and yet powerful, and Sam knew instinctively that the thing was screaming. The Elf pulled his arm to the right, trying to catch the monster, but even with five legs it was quick. It skittered over the lorry and vanished up the road.

Fire splashed over the lorry, and Sam winced at the extreme heat that drifted off the Elf in waves. The lorry's cab exploded with a soft thump, and more flames rose to cover it. Sam thought it wasn't like in the movies – the cab hadn't even lifted from the ground.

Then the Elf looked at him with those hate-filled eyes and pointed the lethal hand at him. In his altered state, Sam saw that the mouth tattooed into the Elf's palm looked real. He thought he saw a forked tongue flicker in its depths.

'It looks like you brought your fist to a firefight,' the Elf spat. Sam opened his mouth to beg for his life, but it was too late. The fire billowed towards him, and all he could see was white. In the moment before he was wiped from existence, Sam found himself hoping that Tabby was okay. He loved her so much ...

GRÍMNIR

THE BLIND ROOM WAS AN ANOMALY THAT THE COURTS HAD TRIED TO FATHOM for millennia, without success. It was first discovered in The Tower at Dusk, before the ascendance of man, by a curious Ifrit called Kilmanoi. The only evidence that Kilmanoi had been there was a short note in chalk on the wall outside. The signed message read, 'Don't go in'. His body's ashes were never found.

Unlike humans, members of the Courts were not inclined to ignore such an obvious warning. They named the vast area the room was part of 'Kilmanoi's Hall' and restricted themselves to peering into the pitch-black room for a few years. Eventually losing interest, they wandered back to the upper levels to enjoy the revels and orgies that took place beneath the dying sun.

A few centuries later, the curiosity became an object of interest once more, but only because of where it was situated. Kilmanoi's Hall was a nexus: a vast cavern, containing thousands of Fairy-Rings that led all over the human world. As the Courts became gradually more interested in the lush green planet their own home seemed inextricably attached to, Kilmanoi's Hall became more and more important.

The Unseelie Court especially came to spend more and more time there, launching their great hunts into the barbarian wasteland, running down humans in countries across the globe with fierce delight, and spawning the stories that laid the foundations of the modern human myths that Cú Roí's terrible war would build upon.

Soon, Kilmanoi's Hall became a thriving supernatural way station, busy with Svartálfar going to Eastern Europe, where it was dark and gloomy, to terrorise a human village with their vampiric ways, or Ifrit off to the deserts they so loved, to rape human women and kill their men. Inevitably, some travellers got lost and strayed into the Blind Room. Their screams rang across the great hall for hours before being abruptly silenced.

Eventually, an Ifrit scholar called Dizen-Thut – the last disciple of the Firstcomer, Trauco-Lilû – wondered what the equivalent room in The Tower at Dawn was like. After a lot of negotiation with a wary Seelie Court, Dizen-Thut gained access to the Blind Room in the alternate Tower, and what he found

surprised him.

Like the Unseelie Court, its counterpart was also venturing more and more into the lands of men. The Elves found themselves in love with the misty vales and heavy forests of the islands that would become Ireland and England, Scotland and Wales. The Jötnar found kindred spirits in the savage, strong men of Scandinavia. There the Jötnar warred amongst each other and forged legends of giants and gods.

When Dizen-That finally set foot in the bustle of the Seelie Court's version of Kilmanoi's Hall, he found it very similar to the one he knew. It was a vast space.

The hall was perfectly circular, spanning most of the entire width of The Tower, twenty-five miles in diameter. It was impossible to see one side from the other. In the centre was a massive well, nine miles across; a bore that ran down the centre of The Tower to unfathomable depths. Somewhere below, huge holes had been left open in The Tower's side, and the dawn light flooded in, creeping up to cast its glow in Kilmanoi's Hall. Directly above the well, in an arched and vaulted ceiling a mile high, the shaft continued, driving up into the rest of The Tower. Wisps of cloud drifted through the hall and disappeared into the upper shaft in a gentle vortex. The light from below went with the vapour, making the shaft an inverted light-well that gave some illumination to the levels above. Light was important. It was the only difference from The Tower at Dusk.

Nobody knew how far down the well went. Nobody knew if The Tower ever reached a theoretical ground, or whether it went on forever, just floating in space. A Fairy-Ring that solved the riddle had never been discovered; many had gone mad trying to fathom the mystery.

Those so struck by lunacy took to sitting at the edge of the well staring down into its golden, misty depths. Eventually they threw themselves off, never to be seen again. As a result, the Elves had erected a huge fence around the well to stop suicides. The Unseelie Court hadn't bothered.

What remained of the floor of the Hall was a relatively thin halo; a band just under eight miles wide and dotted with Fairy-Rings. This was where the vast business of travel took place.

Signs helped the Seelie Court navigate some of the Fairy-Rings. Others had not yet been labelled. A core of intrepid adventurers slowly made their way from Ring to Ring, mapping their destinations with almost religious fervour.

A market town had sprung up in this nexus between well and walls; a thriving metropolis of millions of souls, pulled from the airy upper reaches by the allure of the mysterious place.

Balconies, windows, doors, and steep meandering staircases were carved into the walls. A vast honeycomb of rooms faced out across the new town towards the well. It was as if some alien hand had been inspired to re-build the tombs of Petra on an inconceivably vast scale. Or perhaps somebody had once glimpsed this wonder and tried to recreate it in the cradle of human civilisation.

Within the walls, beyond the doors and windows, were narrow, two-storey structures. They were pleasant, if small, accommodations. They were much sought after as homes and shops. There were hundreds of thousands of them, side by side and stacked on top of each other. Those rooms went nearly all the way up to the ceiling of Kilmanoi's Hall. In the early days, when the Hall had first been discovered, somebody had counted that there were four-hundred-and-thirty-eight storeys. The higher floors were accessed by hidden stairways embedded in the outer wall, but after about level fifteen, they tended to be unoccupied. It took too long to climb up to them. Dizen-Thut found every one of the lower quarters occupied, even the Blind Room.

This was a surprise, for the two Towers tended to copy each other in all things; if the Blind Room in The Tower at Dusk was lethal, then Dizen-Thut justly suspected that it would prove lethal in The Tower at Dawn as well. Just better lit.

Therefore, finding a family of Elves living there quite happily turned out to be something of a shock. The Elves were not welcoming. They did not like Ifrit or what they did in the human world. The son particularly resented Dizen-Thut's presence, calling him a filthy rapist, a murderer, and an Incubus.

Dizen-Thut had been all these things in his time, and so did not take offence. He spent two days speaking with the elfin shopkeeper and his surly son, asking them if they had ever felt any malevolent spirits or evil miasmas, or if

they had noticed any feelings of dread or unexplained weakness. Neither had, and by the end of the second day, the son decided that enough was enough and moved to eject Dizen-Thut forcibly.

Not one to allow any such assault on his person, Dizen-Thut reached for the magic that was his birthright, intending to sear the impertinent youth across the face in a gentle warning. He was shocked when said youth's fist cannoned into his chin and sent him sprawling to the floor.

Dizen-Thut barely noticed the father pulling the son away nor being helped to his feet and apologised to. Instead, he turned to the Elf and asked him if he could tap into the magic. The Elf, who never had any need at home, was nonplussed at first, and then his eyes widened in all the confirmation Dizen-Thut needed. The Ifrit rushed from the house and sent an arc of fire swelling over the crowd outside.

Once the panic subsided, Dizen-Thut was taken to the Seelie Court where he explained his findings. The Blind Room did not allow any magic to be used. It effectively neutered the people of the Courts.

Unfortunately for Dizen-Thut, he never managed to understand why, nor could he work out why the equivalent room in The Tower at Dusk had proved so deadly. He spent a very long time trying to figure it out before he threw himself down the well. His successor also attempted to solve the riddle, and his successor, and his successor after that. The last member of the Courts to try was one of Creachmhaoil's contemporaries – an Elf called Darian en Yiliman who moved into the house to study it better.

When the unspeakable happened – when The Transmogrification began – it was in Kilmanoi's Hall, the most densely populated area of The Tower at Dawn. Shortly afterwards, Darian en Yiliman was bitten by his wife and joined the vast, twenty-million-strong army of ravaging undead that still plagued The Tower.

GRÍMNIR LISTENED TO THE MAIDEN OF EARTH AND WATER IN SILENCE. WHEN she had finished her story, he looked at her, strung up opposite him and grunted.

‘You cannot free us then?’

‘No Grímnir – here in the Blind Room I am as helpless as a babe. I have been here for years now. Creachmhaoil betrayed me as I knew he had to, but I hid the Seed of my power.’

‘And now we have it,’ said the Svartálfar Leanan, drawing a possessive finger down Grímnir’s naked chest.

‘You have nothing, child,’ the Maiden said gently. Leanan’s face screwed up in anger, and her form shifted across the room. The vampire’s hand lashed into the Maiden’s face.

‘Careful, my Love,’ her brother said quietly. ‘The magic that sustains them cannot be used here. They are as fragile as humans, and I would hate for you to kill her before the time is right.’

Leanan backed away still snarling. Grímnir saw with anger that a trail of blood ran from the Maiden’s mouth. She had been treated similarly in the past. Her skin was grimy and scarred, her face gaunt, her eyes blackened. Her hair, which he remembered as being long and lustrous, was clumpy and matted. She was naked, and her body looked like it had been severely beaten over a long period of time.

‘You will die for this – both of you,’ Grímnir said.

‘And who will kill us, Jötnar? You?’ Damballah laughed.

‘I will be free one day, Svartálfar. Then your race will finally be extinguished.’

‘The day you come for me, I will have stripped you of your magic – I will rip your face off and choke you to death with it.’

The Maiden spoke before Grímnir could reply. ‘Quiet, Grímnir.’ She turned to face Damballah, her bruised features still exuding serenity. ‘My husband will not be pleased when he finds out what you have done here, Svartálfar.’

‘I saw your husband – he was weak and pathetic. He is no threat to me.’

‘You saw a reflection – we wax and wane like the moon you so adore, Svartálfar. Be careful where you stand when we are full once more.’

‘Empty threats and dull gibberish. You who came to me ... me! ... asking for help, and then allowed yourself to be led here as trusting as a babe. You call

yourself a god ... please be quiet lest I change my mind and allow my sister to discipline you.' The Maiden fell silent, and Damballah's nebulous form appeared to nod in satisfaction. A dark shape skittered into the room: a black globe on five thick legs, vaguely arachnid but mostly alien.

'A Sylph,' Grímnir spat. 'Filthy by-blow.'

'Be kind to my pet – he is injured,' Damballah admonished.

The Sylph moved clumsily over to Damballah, and its body turned to a shadow that flowed into the Prince of Rattlesnakes. 'Ah,' Damballah said with satisfaction. 'The last piece of the puzzle has been located. It is time for the Svartálfar to return to the world of men.'

'May I come with you, brother? I am hungry.'

'But who will watch the prisoners, my Love?'

'Make Creachmhaoil do it. The bloodless old bastard will enjoy it.'

Damballah laughed. 'You are a delight, my dear. Of course you may come. Why should Cú Roí be the only one who dines on the flesh of man tonight? And when we succeed, we will feast on the blood of man day and night for a century!'

Sergei

AT FIFTY-NINE, SERGEI CONSTANTINE WAS STILL IN INCREDIBLE PHYSICAL condition. He trained with free weights and performed callisthenics every day, and ran ten kilometres every three days to keep his body lithe and trim.

He was aware that it wasn't enough; ever since he turned thirty, he had noticed year by year that bumps and scrapes did not heal as quickly, his joints ached abominably when it was damp, and God help him if a cold draught got anywhere near his left hip. The muscles of his chest, though still powerful, were wiry, knotted ropes. Twenty years ago, they had bulged as if slabs of chiselled

rock had been forced beneath his flesh. Since then, his skin had sagged and was now marred with stretch marks and liver spots. His arms were thin and looked distressingly like an old man's. Sergei was well past his prime and he knew it.

More and more often, Sergei found himself lying awake at night, unable to sleep, thinking of all the terrible things he had done in his life. Sleepless night followed sleepless night, and Sergei could feel the foetid stink of death's breath caressing the back of his neck. The monster stalked him, and there was nowhere to run.

Sergei had been a good communist and rejected all concepts of God. In his youth, he murdered at the state's behest without any moral objection or fear of a higher power. Now, as he approached the end, he wasn't so sure. He caught himself fervently praying for forgiveness, less and less inclined to chastise himself and stop.

Misery and murder were his legacies. If there was an afterlife, Sergei knew where he was going, and it scared him. At least, it had scared him. Not anymore. Not since he returned to the Master the night before and reported where Rowan and his bunch of misfit friends were hiding. His reward was a bite to the neck from the Master himself. He had lain delirious until the morning, when he was kicked out of his slumber by Samuel Autumn and ordered to lead the way to the flat.

Upon first awakening, Sergei felt weak and sick. Now, a few hours later, he felt power rushing through his body. His old bones no longer ached, his stick-like arms were powerful and solid. His lethal training, driven by the new strength in his limbs, aided him in the massacre on the street. Sergei shot every man, woman, and child he could find.

When he ran out of bullets, he used his hands. The exhilaration was still with him. The sound of cracking bones and snapping necks still rang in his ears; the memory of soft flesh giving way to his steel fingers made his palms itch; the taste of blood ...

Sergei stopped walking after the naked woman, Annalise, who was dragging a young girl back for the Master to impregnate. They were halfway up the stairs to the Master's lair in the Beetham Tower. The multiple flights did not bother

him, but the flood of saliva that rushed into his mouth at the thought of human blood did.

He wiped his hand across his face; it was sticky. Sergei looked down and saw more red on his fingers. He licked his lips and the delicious taste of blood filled him with ecstasy. Sergei stood still, confused for a moment. He couldn't remember eating anybody – surely, he would remember that.

Shouldn't it worry him more? Cannibalism, after all, was one of the final taboos he had never broken. He realised it didn't bother him. In fact, he realised he wanted more. Shrugging, he ran up the stairs to catch up with Annalise. He revelled in the ease with which he did it.

The lower floors – the hotel – were dark and dingy, without power and were currently empty. In the next few hours they would be the lairs of new Barghest and the freshly bitten: those humans selected to join the Master's legion of gods.

The upper floors – the apartments – were accessed by a separate door at street level and were inaccessible from the hotel. The apartments had replaced the birthing pits; they would soon be filled with women, hundreds of them, struggling with the heavy, rapidly maturing pregnancies of the Barghest. The woman Annalise dragged behind her was one of the first. Sergei had a busy day ahead of him if the Master was to have his army.

Cú Roí himself had taken his seat of power on the top floor, in a penthouse apartment of lavish luxury, far removed from the filth of the Mayfield Station. He had found a smart grey business suit that nearly fit him. Though the legs and arms were almost comically short, he looked half respectable in a scruffy, long-haired sort of way. As far as Sergei was concerned, the Master could dress any way he wanted. He was a god amongst gods, after all. Life was good, Sergei thought with self-satisfaction ... and it was going to last forever.

ROWAN

THE HUGE SHADOWY CREATURE – WHICH CAM HAD TAKEN TO CALLING THE Penticock, in reference to its five remaining phallus-like limbs – had left a trail of upturned cars along Deansgate, as far as Camp Street. Cam gazed along the path of destruction. Rowan sat down on the kerb of the road. He felt strange. His brother-in-law was dead. Rowan had liked Sam a lot; he was a nice man and good to his sister, until he became infected with whatever it was that the monsters had given to him. Yet Rowan had experienced a real sense of satisfaction when Cam ripped him from existence. Rowan felt a bit guilty about that, and he couldn't quite work out why.

He sat for a moment and tried to sort through his feelings. He stared idly at the Beetham Tower. Slowly it stole his attention. It looked broken, but it wasn't dead. It was a tall building; forty-seven storeys of glass and steel. A hotel made up the first twenty-three storeys while the upper half comprised of private apartments. Halfway up, where the two distinct sections met, the building was cantilevered outwards towards the north. It was as if a child had taken two matchboxes, one slightly wider than the other, and then stacked the larger atop the smaller. It was a monolith of elitism, used to ruling the skyline: a dominating reminder of what wealth and power could achieve.

Now something wicked had taken up residence within it, and somehow the building had turned sinister and warped. He felt like it was watching him, and he could feel its malevolence. It was calling to him. Tabby was in there. She had to be. He stood up and took a step towards the dark entrance.

‘We have to go after it,’ Cam said, breaking the spell.

‘After what?’

‘The Penticock.’

‘No way. I need to find Tabby.’

‘Remember what the Tattooist and my dad told us. We can't win – not

without getting Camulus back to Grímnir and finding the Maiden.'

'I need to find my sister. I have to get to her. You don't understand ... I have to.' Rowan didn't know how to explain the burning need inside him to save Tabby.

'It'd be suicide.' Cam put a hand on Rowan's shoulder. 'The Penticock is our best chance of finding them. Which means it's the best chance of defeating Cú Roí. Which means it's the best chance of bringing your sister out alive.' A Barghest appeared from the wreckage in front of the Beetham Tower, and Cam blasted it into ash with a casual gesture. 'You have to give me a few hours, Rowan. You have to trust me.'

Rowan eyed his companion and rescuer warily. The Elf was different from the tired but sarcastic individual he'd met on a hill in Lyme Park the day before. He was quieter, more introspective, yet Rowan could sense a rage in him. His newfound power was a worry as well. Rowan did not know much about the Courts and how they worked, but he had picked up enough to know that the four races did not like each other very much ... why would an Ifrit, even one seemingly allied with what passed for the good guys ... imbue Cam, a self-confessed wastrel, with such unimaginable power?

Still, it was handy to have a walking napalm strike on your side. He clutched his gun as tight as he could, but knew it was nothing more than a comfort blanket against the likes of the now deceased Sam. He looked at his watch. It was nine-thirty. The truth was, he needed the Elf. His shoulders slumped in resignation. 'Fine,' he said. 'Let's go.'

From Camp Street, the Penticock had moved randomly through the back streets until it finally turned into Gartside Street. They knew this, because it had left more crushed cars and flattened lamp posts along the narrow road.

On Gartside Street the Penticock's trail suddenly stopped. There was more ruin here, but they could both see it was old. Barriers surrounded a big hole in the ground where roadworks had been started and then forgotten about. To their left were modern-looking brick buildings. The tasteful bronze plaques by their doors suggested that they were business premises. To their right, a grey breeze-block monstrosity rose several storeys into the air. Ahead of them another

modern building, all glass and steel, blocked the winter sun, casting a chill shadow onto the small street.

‘Where’d it go?’ Rowan asked.

Cam looked around, his face blank. ‘It has gone to The Tower at Dawn.’

‘Not the other one?’

‘No,’ Cam said. ‘No, it will have gone to its master, and its master will be with the Maiden. The Blind Room. Do you remember?’

‘No.’

‘My dad said it,’ Cam said slowly. ‘The Blind Room in The Tower at Dawn is the only place that can hold the Maiden. I think there’s a Ring here. I can feel it.’

‘Can we use it?’

‘The Penticock did ... I suppose so. We just have to find the boundaries.’

‘How do we do that?’

‘We walk.’ Together they began to walk in a clockwise circle around the hole in the ground. It seemed the most obvious place to start. They began in a wide loop, climbing over lumps of debris where they had to. Rowan followed on Cam’s heels, staring at the shotgun that slapped gently against the Elf’s back with every step. Slowly the circle got tighter, until they were in the roadworks themselves, jumping over ditches and stumbling over discarded jackhammers and lengths of pipe.

‘It’s not working,’ Rowan said, but even as he did, he felt his stomach lurch.

‘It’s working,’ Cam said. His voice seemed distant. ‘Keep walking.’

Slowly the street faded from view. The sky turned muddy, the buildings began to warp into strange, impossible shapes, dripping away and running as if subject to an intense heat.

A series of glowing points appeared at Rowan’s feet and with every turn the world got darker and the lights got brighter, until he was following Cam in a void. ‘Keep to the lights – don’t stray from them or you may fall,’ Cam said, his voice garbled as if his head was in a bucket.

‘Fall off what?’ Rowan demanded. Cam didn’t answer. Cautiously, Rowan followed the circle.

Then they stood in a dark space that flickered with the sputtering of thousands of fires. Around him there was some sort of shanty town; ramshackle wooden buildings marched along haphazardly, the stalls of a market following no street plan the marine could discern. He could not see through the maze, but he could see above it. A shaft of soft, natural light rose from the centre of the room and hit the distant ceiling like a nine-mile floodlight. There was a smaller shaft in the centre of the ceiling – it looked small because of the distance and scale of the place, but Rowan thought that it probably spanned a mile or so.

Figures moved through the shanty town – lots of figures. Cam grabbed his arm and pulled him into the shadow of a nearby stall. Rowan stumbled and fell, and Cam went down with him. They rolled into cover. Heavy feet tramped past nearby, and Rowan went still.

‘This is it,’ said a voice, uncomfortably close to where they hid.

‘This will take us to the human world?’ This second voice was female. It had an unnatural, metallic twist to it. The Elf suddenly tensed as if he wanted to stand up, but Rowan restrained him.

Rolling, Rowan managed to position himself so he could see the group stood talking next to the Ring that he and Cam had just travelled through. Six Ifrit towered next to it, their massive bodies swathed in dark robes, their flaming eyes searing points of red and orange light that flickered and spat in front of them. In their centre stood a beautiful woman and a shadowy shape that Rowan could not quite focus on.

‘My dear, any of the Rings in this hall will take us to the mortal world, but this one will take us to the Miracle Child.’

‘Will there be people to eat?’

The male figure laughed. ‘Of course, my dear – you will return to The Tower fat and bloated.’

The woman slapped at the shadow creature’s arm. ‘You are unkind, brother,’ she said sulkily.

The shadow laughed again. ‘Come, we must make haste.’ The small party began to walk around the fire, their shapes becoming fainter and fainter. On the third turn they vanished.

Cam pulled Rowan up silently. ““Make haste.” Who says something like that?’ asked the Elf. ‘It’s like they’re actually reading dialogue from a Tolkien movie script.’

‘What were they?’ Rowan asked. ‘I thought you were going to attack them.’

‘Vampires,’ Cam said. ‘Dark Elves, Svartálfar ... they have many names. The woman was the creature who bit me.’ Rowan heard hate in Cam’s voice.

‘Well, they’re gone now. What next?’

‘We find Grímnir and the Maiden. Come on – we need to get somewhere high to figure out where we’re going.’

They ran quickly through the ghost town. It took them a while; they ducked in and out of sight as Ifrit patrols marched past. Eventually, they got to the wall that ran around the giant room. They moved to their right, following the wall until they found a doorway, which they slipped through.

It was one of the concealed subsidiary stairwells that serviced the residences higher up the interior wall. They climbed silently together until they were ten storeys up. They found a balcony and gazed out across Kilmanoi’s Hall. It was an awe-inspiring sight. The central light-well looked like a vast lucent sea. Wisps of white cloud tumbled sedately a mile above its pearlescent face. Tens of thousands of fires flickered across the halo of floor that surrounded it. Smaller sparks moved this way and that between the fires. Vertigo hit him, and his perspective changed. He felt as if he were looking down at a full moon, close enough to touch, surrounded by a firmament of yellow sparks. Rowan closed his eyes tight.

‘Good God,’ he whispered. He took a deep breath.

‘Ifrit,’ Cam said coldly.

Rowan opened his eyes again. ‘Are the moving sparks their eyes?’

Cam didn’t answer straight away. He leaned on the balustrade and gazed out over the hall. It was peaceful, Rowan thought settling in next to the Elf. This high up, there was no sound. The air was moving, but it was gentle and warm. ‘People think that the Ifrit only hunt in arid climates,’ Cam said. ‘Deserts. Places like that. The Djinn of Arabia. But they used to hunt in Europe and the Americas as well. My dad told me about it when I was a kid. I used to beg him for scary

stories before I went to bed. He was a good man. A good father. I wish I had been a good son.'

'Hey, come on ...' Rowan began. Cam waved him quiet. Rowan was frightened that Cam was slipping into shock and melancholy. The last thing he wanted was to get lumbered down here with an emotional wreck.

'It's okay,' Cam said as if reading his mind. 'I'm not going to freak out on you. It's difficult though ... I miss him, and I don't feel that I deserve to miss him. Do you understand?'

Rowan sighed. 'I don't know, Cam. I miss my dad too. And my mum. And I miss Tabby, Cam. I miss her desperately, and I need to get her back and make sure she's safe.'

'I'm sorry.' Cam went quiet. He didn't bother to explain exactly what he was sorry for. Rowan itched to get moving, but he knew he couldn't push the Elf. People reacted to grief in different ways. Of course, strictly speaking, Cam wasn't a person.

'Those were good years,' Cam started again, almost whispering. 'I worshipped my father. He was so strong, so wise, so calm. Why did I leave? Why did I abandon the one person in the world – in two worlds – who loved me absolutely? It all seems so ... petty now. So juvenile.'

'We all do stupid things,' Rowan said lamely.

'Yes, we do,' Cam said. 'They would hide in the forests, where it was dark,' he continued without pausing. It took Rowan a moment to realise he was talking about the Ifrit again. 'Their skin is black but their eyes ... well, you've seen them. They would wait in the gloom, still, silent, and they would watch. And when somebody passed by, maybe in the late evening, maybe at night, they would see those bright twin balls hanging there. Twin suns. Their eyes in the gloaming. And when they went to investigate, the Ifrit would take them. Witchfires. That's what my father used to call them. Witchfires. Or will-o'-the-wisps.'

'Why?' Rowan asked.

'Why what?'

'Why wait like that? They could just walk into a house and take somebody.'

‘My dad said it was because of the meat.’

‘The meat?’

Cam stared out at the fires so far below him. He seemed distracted. ‘If the animal is scared or gets chance to run, lactic acids build in the muscles and make the flesh tough and stringy. Not pleasant to eat. But if the animal comes to you and you kill it before it knows what’s happened, then it stays tender. The Unseelie Court is all about their blood and meat.’

‘Human meat,’ Rowan said flatly.

‘Of course,’ Cam agreed absently. ‘Human meat.’

‘Is that what they are, then? All those lights down there? Will-o’-the-wisps?’

‘Their eyes? No. We’re too far away. Probably torches. Lots and lots of torches. Held by lots and lots of Ifrit. There must be thousands of them.’

‘Can’t you just burn them?’

‘I doubt it – they are creatures of fire ... I’m not sure it’s worth the risk to find out. Look over there.’

Cam pointed sideways along the circumference of the vast hall. To their left, there was a much greater concentration of lights near one cliff face wall of the great circular room. It was darker there, away from the lightwell, and they looked like swirling embers against a night sky. From this height, it did not look so far away, but Rowan estimated that if they went back down to the hall’s floor and then followed the building line to that spot, they would have to walk about five miles.

‘They’re crowded around something,’ Rowan said.

‘That is where Grímnir must be. Where the Blind Room is. They’re guarding him. We’ll never get through them on our own. Not on our own, but I think I’ve got an idea.’

‘Great. Let’s hear it.’

Cam looked at him and smiled. ‘Hunger. It’s an honest thing, hunger. Hunger makes you predictable. You can always rely on something that is hungry: it has to eat. You just have to bring it to the dinner table.’ Cam explained his plan to Rowan, who listened in horrified silence.

‘Sweet risen Christ,’ he said when Cam had finished. ‘We’re both going to

die.'

MARK

'I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT I CAN DO, MR. JONES,' DR. REED SAID IN A querulous voice. 'I have never seen anything like this before. Even if I had, I'm not an Obstetrician – I'm a surgeon.'

Dr. Reed was one of Jason's contacts: a man who, due to a gambling addiction, was happy to patch up those of Jason's acquaintances who suffered the occasional bullet wound or knifing, off the books and cash in hand.

'Surely there's something you can do. Abort it, for Christ's sake. It's killing her.'

'Nobody's touching my baby,' Tabitha hissed from where she lay, pinned beneath her belly on Mark's bed. Since they got back, Tabitha had become more and more unreasonable regarding the thing in her womb.

'Of course not, Tabitha – your baby is going to be fine.' A huge lump pushed itself out of her stomach, stretching the skin and splitting it. Rancid-smelling pus flowed out of the wound.

'Look, he's kicking,' Tabitha said happily. Mark and Dr. Reed shared a look.

'Doctor, can you step outside with me please?'

'Gladly,' the doctor muttered, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Once they were safely out on the landing, Mark leant against a wall and put his head in his hands. 'It's all falling apart again.'

'Again?'

Mark looked up at him. 'We need to get that thing out of her.'

'What is it?'

'A monster from Hell, Doctor. A monster. What's our best bet?'

'It's huge, whatever it is. I really don't know ...'

'You're a surgeon – cut it out.'

‘A caesarean might kill her – you saw the size of it. Opening her up wide enough to get the baby out ... well, it will be difficult to sew her back up.’

‘You saw the size of her stomach. What do you think will happen if she tries to give birth naturally?’

The doctor blanched. ‘Point taken. We will have to sedate her.’

‘Do it. And do it quickly. These things grow fast.’

The doctor muttered something and turned to go back into the bedroom. Mark couldn’t bring himself to return just yet. He went to his study and ordered the television to switch on. The news was dedicated to the evacuation of Manchester. A concurrent piece was running about a massacre that had occurred in a flat in the city, earlier in the morning. The press were tentatively linking the two. He tried Jason’s phone again. So far, he had been unable to get hold of the man. This time, somebody picked up.

‘Hello,’ asked a strange voice on the other end of the line.

‘Who is this?’ Mark demanded.

‘This is Detective Inspector Hildemare. Who’s this?’

Mark felt his stomach sink. ‘I’m a friend of a man called Jason Leadman. You’re on his phone. Is he in some sort of trouble?’

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you, Sir, but Jason is dead. He was murdered.’

‘Was he at the apartment in Manchester that’s all over the news?’

‘Yes, he was. What’s your name, Sir?’

Mark hung up. Things were spiralling out of control. Accessing his computer, he brought up the security footage from when he and Tabitha were taken from the garage.

It was a very good system; it caught Sergei letting Autumn and Leach in, very clearly indeed. Idly, Mark stroked the hilt of Camulus, which was lying on his desk. Of the three kidnappers, he knew one was dead. The other two would follow very soon.

ROWAN

THERE WERE ROUGHLY TWENTY CONVENTIONAL EXITS TO KILMANOI'S HALL. Their entrances were situated between the buildings set into the walls that encircled it. They were distinct from the subsidiary staircases – like the one Cam and Rowan had climbed earlier – because they ran all the way up to the higher Tower without exiting into any of the domicile levels. The main stairways were built into the outer skin of The Tower, hidden in the great walls behind the dwellings.

These wide, steeply spiralling staircases rose five-and-a-half thousand feet until they cleared the roof of the massive room and came out in The Tower proper. It was a slogging, time-consuming journey, so the Courts tended to use the Fairy-Rings to traverse the giant place.

During The Transmogrification, and over a period of years afterwards, the twenty main staircases had given the Twisted the means to migrate to the higher levels. Closer to fresh, living meat. The Ifrit defence against the Twisted was both simple and effective: to prevent them coming back down, they set massive blazes at the bottom of each stairwell, effectively shutting the ORCs out. Not that the creatures seemed aware that anybody was in Kilmanoi's Hall. Beyond the flames, the wide stairway was empty.

'So how do we get rid of the fire?' Rowan asked.

'They're natural,' Cam said. 'Not magical. Even the Ifrit are running out of power. They'll have to refuel them eventually.'

Rowan and Cam were looking through the flames into one of the stairways, though they were forced to stand well back due to the fierceness of the blaze. The steps looked standard, rising at about forty-five-degrees, but they were also very wide. Twenty people could easily hike their way up them, shoulder to shoulder, Rowan thought glumly. The crackling that came from the burning wood in front of it was loud and quick and angry. The fire burned orange and

yellow, and it danced and spat at them like it was young and alive. Smoke billowed towards the distant ceiling in thick columns.

‘It won’t burn down for a while, by the looks of things. At least it isn’t guarded. How are we going to get through?’ They were lurking amongst head-high stacks of broken wood. All the nearby stalls and shacks had been levelled and heaped up ready to be used as fuel.

‘I’m not sure,’ Cam said.

‘What about your arm?’

‘It sets fires – it doesn’t take them away.’

‘Could an Ifrit put it out?’

‘Even if it could, how would we control it? A gun won’t kill one of them, neither will fire. No, we have to find another way of dousing it.’

‘I don’t see any fire extinguishers around here.’

‘What about if we take away the fuel?’

‘What?’

‘At the moment, it’s burning at a normal temperature but ...’ Cam pointed his dragon arm at the fire and Rowan opened his mouth to protest. He didn’t get chance.

White-hot light flashed out of Cam’s palm. Rowan’s eyes closed automatically as the orange glow suddenly went supernova. He felt the short hairs of his eyebrows crinkling, and his face began to tingle alarmingly. He dropped to his knees and turned his face away, hunching his shoulders against the sudden heat. The air was sucked from his lungs, and he felt himself go light-headed as asphyxiation suddenly and unexpectedly set in.

Then it was over. Rowan gulped in as much air as he could, and slowly his senses returned. His skin felt sore and hot. His neck and back ached even worse than before. The atmosphere was hot and suffocating. He blinked for a few seconds, trying to get rid of the flashes and sparks that seemed intent on blinding him. Finally, he staggered to his feet.

Cam’s clothes were burned, and his face was blackened with soot; the twin cuts on his cheeks were red welts that seemed to glow from the filth. His hair hung limp and grimy; its golden colour completely hidden by clinging smoke.

Cam coughed.

Rowan peered around him. The fire was gone. A thick mantle of ash covered the floor. The stone walls around the stairs glowed red hot and looked soft and runny. Cam coughed again. 'Well that worked,' he wheezed through a mouthful of soot.

'Yep,' Rowan said. He blinked a few more times to try and clear out the floaters.

'We'll give it a few moments for the stone to cool down.'

'That's a good idea, yes,' Rowan said.

As they waited, Rowan peered up the stairs. They ran anticlockwise and with the fire gone, he could see faint light creeping down towards them. He mentioned it to Cam. 'We're at the edge of The Tower at Dawn,' the Elf said. 'There'll be windows. It's one thing less to worry about.'

'What is?'

'The dark.' Cam paused. Then he said, 'It's a lot of stairs. Can you make it?'

'They're going to be a bugger to climb,' Rowan replied miserably. 'But I'll be okay. It's coming down that's worrying me. At that angle, considering ... well, you know?'

'Yes, I know.' Cam frowned.

'What are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking that we'll just have to figure it out when we get there.'

'Great plan. There's nothing like being prepared,' Rowan said sarcastically.

Cam slapped him on the back and said, 'That's the spirit!' He began to jog up the stairs. 'Try to keep up,' he called over his shoulder.

Rowan took a deep breath, and then started at a steady pace over the hot, malleable floor after him. The walls and floor were coated in thick black ash, and the whole place smelled like a bonfire. Rowan found it close and difficult to breathe; he thought it might take him the rest of his life to get the smell of smoke out of his nostrils. 'Not that long then,' he muttered to himself dejectedly.

AT THE TOP, THREE-AND-A-HALF-HOURS LATER, ROWAN WAS WHEEZING. Although he was in peak physical condition and could run forever, the charge up the stairwell had nearly defeated him. After an hour, he'd begun to make sporadic stops to regain his breath. These breaks had become more and more regular as they went. He'd been forced to rest every fifteen minutes or so for the last forty-five minutes. In comparison, Cam breathed evenly and easily. 'I've got to wait for a few minutes,' Rowan gasped. 'I'm knackered.'

'You stay here,' Cam said. 'I'll go and have a quick scout around.'

Rowan looked around the wide, empty gallery. On their left, huge windows with stone frames let in the dawn light every fifteen feet or so. It was clean and quiet, and seemed to stretch out ahead of them forever. It felt forlorn and haunted, and it made Rowan's hackles rise. 'Do you know what – I think I feel better,' he coughed.

'Come on then.'

Rowan followed Cam along the main corridor. They did not detour left or right, nor were they tempted to explore any of the smaller rooms and corridors that disappeared in a maze of twists and turns. They stuck to a straight line and followed the windows.

While they walked, Cam shouted. 'Come on you ugly zombie bastards! Fresh meat, get your fresh meat here!'

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' Rowan asked.

'Nope,' Cam replied. He began to sing 'She Drives Me Crazy' by Fine Young Cannibals. Rowan barked a laugh and then joined in raucously, his growl completely out of sync with Cam's pure, harmonious voice. They sang until they heard the first blood-chilling howl echo back through The Tower towards them.

'What was that?' Rowan asked. The howl had come from the other side of a bright archway at the end of the gallery.

'What we came to find,' Cam replied quietly. 'Come on, we've got to make sure there are enough.' He began to talk loudly, and Rowan understood that he wasn't speaking to him – Cam was speaking for his own benefit.

'I'm supposed to be immortal: I'm supposed to live forever, and here I am walking into a mass of zombies to try and save the world. I'm going to die. I

know I am. I've been too lucky – the vampires, the zombies, the werewolves ... I feel like I'm working at a carnival house of horror.

'Four days ago, I was happy to live out my remaining years drunk as a skunk, but it's not enough now; I want to live.' Cam began to shout. 'Do you hear me, you evil little shits? I want to live!'

Another howl came from the archway ahead, this one joined by a cacophony of others. 'They're close,' Rowan said.

'As soon as we've got their attention, we get out of there. Okay? If any cut us off on the way back, shoot them in the head. For God's sake, don't get any blood in your mouth or eyes.'

They stepped through the archway together, and Rowan gasped. There was a waist-high balustrade to his left. Above it, for eight or nine storeys, there was nothing but empty space. There was no wall here: it opened into the infinite sky outside The Tower, and the dawn sun was bright and strong. They were stood on a wide concourse, which ended at another wide archway three or four hundred feet ahead of them. There was a second balustrade to his right. Rowan stepped over, lost in wonder, the Twisted momentarily forgotten. Beyond the barrier, the floor fell away.

It was a garden room. With his back to the dawn light, Rowan could see a thick tropical jungle spread out below him. The top of a palm tree reared over the balustrade, curving towards the light, and he reached out and pulled a coconut from near the trunk. He laughed in delight and tossed it to Cam, who was grinning just as stupidly.

Twenty feet below, the floor was dead. The concourse cast a shadow for several feet, but where the sun began, so did the plants. They tumbled and tangled and rolled in dense profusion, each plant lost within the next, their flowers spotting the foliage like a child's glitter painting.

A hundred feet away a round, stepped pyramid was stacked up to the ceiling. Rowan counted ten levels, each crammed with trees and plants. Openings led into it, dark and overgrown. Vines that dripped with huge red flowers hung down the sides, so only the occasional flash of white gave away the colour of the stone beneath. Every second level had a cantilevered viaduct projecting out from it.

Each viaduct stopped once it was past the base of the pyramid, and clear waterfalls glittered to the jungle below. Rainbows shimmered in their vapour. The viaducts at the top of the pyramid were impossibly long and looked like they would snap away at the faintest touch.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Rowan said.

‘This is what we used to be. Now it’s theirs. Look.’

Rowan peered towards where Cam was pointing. A mob of nightmarish figures had gathered on the edge of the highest level of the pyramid. There was a lone, eerie howl, and then they poured over it. They climbed down the face of the pyramid with incredible speed, swinging from vines or just jumping. Some were so eager to get to living flesh that they ran along the viaducts and dived headlong into oblivion. More and more came, an impossible mass appearing from within the pyramid until hundreds, thousands, were lost in the vegetation below them. Rowan stood spellbound. He could see the fronds and leaves whipping back and forth with the rush of their passing. ‘Oh shit,’ Rowan whispered. ‘Why are they all in there? What is it? A nest or something?’

‘I think that they’re everywhere. All over The Tower. These just happen to be here. There will be more ... look,’ Cam pointed to the archway at the other end of the gallery. A throng of ORCs were charging from it and towards where they stood. ‘Get ready to run.’

A rotten hand gripped the balustrade a few feet away. Rowan took a step backwards. A broken, skeletal thing, most of the flesh of its shoulders and chest gone, its face a running nightmare of rotting flesh and bright, crazy eyes, dragged itself up and over the balustrade. It hissed at him, revealing blackened stumps of teeth. Flexing its swollen fingers, it threw itself at Rowan.

Rowan caught a withered wrist expertly and drove a powerful leg up into the thing’s abdomen. It buckled, and Rowan wrenched the arm up over its head and pulled back savagely, hearing the bone snap and pop.

He expected that. What he didn’t expect was for the whole arm to come free of its host like the leg of a roast chicken. He lost his balance and slipped to one knee. The one-armed thing gurgled with delight and rushed towards him, only to disappear in a flash of white fire.

Rowan blinked, wondering if the constant exposure to that sun-like brilliance would do him any lasting damage. Then his vision began to clear, and he saw an army of monsters bearing down on him. He struggled back to his feet in a panic.

‘Run!’ Cam shouted. ‘Back to the stairs – back to the Hall. We’ll lead them right into the Ifrit guard!’ He whooped with glee and the ORCs howled their reply.

Rowan’s vision was still blurred; he stumbled into a balustrade, losing his balance. Cam grabbed his arm and dragged him back before he could fall. The Elf pushed him in the right direction. The shove was all the encouragement he needed. Rowan ran for his life.

MARK

‘HOLD HER!’ DR. REED SHOUTED.

The bedroom had been converted into a makeshift operating theatre. The doctor was dressed in a green surgical gown, and a mask covered his mouth. Mark was similarly dressed. Latex gloves pinched tightly across the backs of his hands, and his palms were sweating.

A metal tray sat on the bedside table. It held a large number of steel scalpels and various clinical-looking tongues and clamps. Dr. Reed had explained to Mark that this operation was a last gasp attempt. There was no anaesthetic, no suction pumps, and only Mark was on hand to help with putting Tabitha back together, because there were no nurses or other medical staff to help. The shock alone might kill her, Mark was informed.

Not that it mattered – without this Hail Mary pass, she was definitely going to die. With it, there was a chance the love of his many lives might survive. Unfortunately, Tabitha was not in agreement.

‘Get away from me! Get off me, you murdering scum! Get away from my baby!’ She thrashed around in the bed, her face so pale and drawn, her eyes so

red-rimmed, and the spit at the corner of her mouth so frothy and rabid that Mark felt like he was in a scene from *The Exorcist*; a Priest trying to pull evil from a young woman. Only they were doing it physically rather than spiritually.

‘Hold her!’ Reed called again. Mark ran to the head of the bed and gripped the top of her arms to stop her lashing out at the doctor.

‘Get away from me, you fucking bastards – I’ll not let you take my baby!’ Tabitha began to cry: great choking sobs interspersed with hate-filled abuse.

‘Tabitha, it’s for your own good!’ Mark told her.

‘Get off me you pervert bastard! You’ve been following me around like some fucking rapist, and now you want to take my baby away from me. You scum!’ she spat at him. ‘You’re jealous because I’m pregnant and you want to take my baby away so you can have me for yourself. You delusional prick! Do you think I believed all that crap about following me through the years? Do you honestly think I’d believe that? You psycho! I know what you’re after, you sick fuck, and you aren’t going to get it. I’ll never let you touch me! I hate you! I hate you!’ She screeched that last so loud it hurt Mark’s ears.

Her words made him blink. A coldness settled on him. ‘No Tabitha,’ he began. ‘No, I told you the truth ...’

‘Get away from me you maniac,’ she screamed beginning to struggle again. ‘You animal! You butcher! You want to cut me open and take my baby! Get away from me!’

Mark stumbled back from her, the words driving through him, punching at his core, taking the wind from him. He loved her – had always loved her and had dedicated his life to her. To hear these things hurt him deeply.

As soon as he let go, Tabitha twisted and grabbed a scalpel from the tray next to the bed. Awkwardly, she wrenched herself around, her stomach restricting her movements, and thrust the blade deep into Mark’s abdomen.

She attacked him furiously, stabbing him over and over again until blood flooded from his side and drenched her hand and arm and the bed she lay on. Dr. Reed stepped back, his eyes wide with shock at the murderous assault. Mark stood and took it, staring down at the twisted fury that overlaid the face of the woman he loved.

He wondered how she could think such things of him as each blow landed. How could she believe he would do anything to hurt her? After fifteen or sixteen stabs – Mark barely felt any of them – Tabitha suddenly convulsed. The scalpel fell from her hand and she cried out, her back arching. Mark watched helplessly as her jaw suddenly clenched, her tongue becoming trapped between her front teeth. He only began to react when she bit clean through it, and it fell onto her chest.

Time slowed to a crawl. Mark leant forwards to try and restrain her; her stomach stretched wide and burst like a lanced boil. An awful smell filled the room – the stink of blood and shit and bile – and Tabitha’s eyes went very wide. Mark stared into them as the light of life slowly disappeared.

Something roared. Tentacles flapped from Tabitha’s eviscerated corpse. Dr. Reed ran away. Mark watched numbly as the Barghest raised its blind head from the mess of guts and internal organs. He watched as it appeared to sniff the air, its writhing mass of pink limbs almost indistinguishable from Tabitha’s insides. He watched as it opened its huge, powerful mouth to roar again. It was only when it turned and bit a huge chunk of flesh from its mother’s ragged corpse that Mark finally regained his senses.

Snatching Camulus from where it was propped up against the wall for just such a contingency, he thrust the rainbow blade through the monster’s mouth. It shivered once, twice, and then went still.

Mark staggered away from the horrific sight, still gripping the sword. Tabitha’s stomach was splayed open like an obscene bird’s nest, her head was tilted backwards, her mouth was open and full of blood, her severed tongue lay below her chin. Her eyes were open and seemed to be staring right at him, accusing, hate-filled.

Rubbing his stomach, Mark could feel where the scalpel had entered his body. Now there was nothing but smooth skin and congealing blood. She was dead and he still lived. This was the price of immortality. He began to cry, and then he turned and walked slowly to his office. He collapsed into his chair. His eyes glazed, and he shut down, slipping into blissful catatonia.

Camhlaidh

THE SPRINT DOWN THE STAIRS WAS TOO MUCH FOR THE HUMAN. CAM HAD HELD off the ORCs with occasional blasts of fire, buying brief seconds, but Rowan had become slower and slower, and more and more winded.

They had descended around two hundred feet before Rowan finally stumbled on the steep steps and collapsed. He was drenched in sweat, and his legs were trembling. 'I can't ...' he muttered. The howling was close.

Cam half carried, half dragged Rowan along beside him for a few more feet, but they were going too slowly. The noise of the approaching horde was so loud, Cam knew they were practically on top of them. Cam stopped next to a window. Rowan leant on the sill for a second, gulped some fresh air, and then slumped to the stairs. He sat with his back to the wall, the window above his head.

'Leave me,' Rowan gasped. 'Go ...'

'If you say, "go on without me", I will kick your tonsils out of your arse. Now get up!'

'I can't. You have to leave me.'

'Oh, do fuck off,' Cam snapped irritably. 'I've got a plan.'

'Not another one,' Rowan panted. 'How many more clusterfucks can we possibly expect to survive?'

'You just told me to leave you behind! Now be quiet, I'm trying to concentrate.' The mob of ORCs came streaming down the stairway behind them. The horde was a breaking wave of living death. The Twisted at the front stumbled and fell and were crushed beneath the pounding feet of those that came behind.

Cam pushed Rowan behind him and unleashed the dragon on his arm. Beams of bright white fire, so hot they were almost liquid, lanced into the zombies, cutting vast swathes through the crowd.

Cam immediately turned towards the wall opposite the window and unleashed another stream of searing flame. It cut a wide hole through the wall. Liquid rock dripped red and orange to the floor. Cam gave the horde another beam of fire, incinerating forty or fifty in the front few rows. Then he gripped Rowan by the collar and threw him through the opening. The marine managed a forlorn wail as he went. Cam followed right after him, ignoring the incredible heat of the molten rock.

‘You crazy bastard,’ Rowan moaned. ‘I think I’ve burned my everything.’

They were in a spacious room. It looked like it had once been some sort of study. The floor was polished stone with a huge blue and green woven rug at its centre. A large wooden desk, piled with brittle papers, sat atop it. There were bookcases against every wall, crammed with dry tomes of every size, shape, and colour. The ones around the hole he had burned through the wall were starting to blaze quite merrily. Opposite the desk, there was a huge stone halo. It was laid flat, like a table. Three thick iron legs held it up, and its surface was covered in thousands of tiny counters. There was one door into the room, and it was wide open. Six fluted stone columns supported a high ceiling, and everything was covered in dust.

Screeching ORCs started to pour through the hole. Cam blasted them from existence. ‘Come on,’ Cam said. He pulled Rowan to his feet and together they stumbled out of the study. More Twisted clawed their way into the study and threw themselves after the human and the Elf.

As soon as they were clear of the room, Cam turned and let loose a bar of dragon fire. The closest ORC was practically touching him, its crooked fingers held out in front of it at the end of scabrous arms, its decomposing face snarling insanely. The white fire turned it into specks of incandescent light. Cam stepped back into the doorway and aimed towards the hole he had made, killing everything in the study. He cut the six columns away, then turned his attention to the ceiling, melting it until the whole thing groaned once and collapsed, filling the study with molten rock and thunderous noise.

Dust spumed into his face, and Cam ducked away, coughing. Rowan was lying on the floor in the next room. Cam lay down next to him and crossed his

arms.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked the marine.

‘Better. I just need a few minutes to catch my breath.’

‘Any burns?’

‘Nothing worth writing home about. It was just the shock of being thrown through a ... I don’t even know what to call it.’

‘Well, that’s good then.’

‘Yep.’ They lay in companionable silence for a few minutes. ‘What next?’

‘Well,’ Cam replied, ‘I’m hoping that the Twisted will carry on down the stairs. A stampede like that ... I can’t see how the ones at the front could stop even if they wanted to. The rest will keep pushing until they’re all the way down in Kilmanoi’s Hall. And then they’ll kill everything.’

‘Right. That’s good. And how are we going to get through all of that?’

‘Erm. Well ... I’m sure I’ll think of something.’

‘Of course you will. So, where the hell are we?’

‘We should be near the top of one of the buildings that surround the Hall. When you’re feeling up to it, we’ll start making our way down.’

IT TURNED OUT THAT THEY WERE DIZZYINGLY HIGH UP IN A SUITE OF APARTMENTS not far from the roof. They were above the clouds, and from that height, the Hall seemed tiny. Beyond the room they had rested in was a balcony, and on it there were six telescopes of various sizes.

‘It must have been used as some sort of observatory,’ Rowan said, putting his eye to one of the telescopes. Cam followed his lead. Without the aid of the telescope, he could see nothing except the glare of the giant hole in the centre of the Hall. With it, he could make out the dots of lights of the Ifrit campfires, and the entrance to the stairwell they had climbed to get above Kilmanoi’s hall. By the looks of things, they had moved about a mile around the circumference of the Tower.

‘Come on, it’s a long way back,’ Cam said after another five minutes playing

with the telescopes. They went quickly, but Rowan was recovering slowly from the journey up, so it still took them another two hours to get near to the bottom. They were about fifteen storeys up when the Twisted burst from the interior stairwell Cam and Rowan had entered so many hours earlier.

Even from a mile away, they had a bird's eye view of the carnage. The Ifrit must have noticed that the fire had gone out because they had built it back up into a shimmering inferno. They also must have heard the shrieking ORCs as they came down the immense length of the stairwell, because there was a small army of around four-thousand fire giants waiting for them.

From where Cam watched, it was almost as if everything paused. As if the world held its breath. Then ORCs began to stream out of the stairwell ablaze, running wildly in all directions. They were quickly put out of their misery. As more and more came through the flames, more and more fell and were trampled by their brethren. The fire began to diminish as it was smothered with the mindless bodies of the dead. Within fifteen minutes, the sheer numbers of Twisted stumbling over the bonfire had put it out. The howling rose to a crescendo, and a tide of raging death poured into Kilmanoi's Hall. Hundreds and then thousands of the Twisted charged into the Ifrit. For a few minutes, the Ifrit line held.

Cam watched in silence as the heaving mass so far below him fell into chaos. Even up here, the stench of charred ORCs was strong in the air. Fire spat everywhere. Howling, grunting, and screaming echoed around the Hall. Cam watched the fighting monsters. They surged back and forth beyond the two buildings that flanked the stairwell like a stormy ocean. Cam felt bewildered. He had caused this. He had engineered this battle. Ifrit were dying because of something he had done, and he felt a strange sense of deep remorse.

The Ifrit died, burning in their own flames. The ORCs broke through their lines and entered Kilmanoi's Hall in their tens of thousands. Cam watched new battle lines being formed as more and more Ifrit dashed to shore up the breach in their defences. Soon, there were five or six different battles spinning wildly through the shanty town. The Twisted coming from the stairwell changed from a river to a stream to a trickle. The fighting moved off around the halo of solid

stone that formed the floor of Kilmanoi's Hall.

Cam pointed to where he thought the Blind Room was. It looked undefended; the vagaries of battle had taken the Ifrit and the Twisted from their path. 'It's time to go.'

Rowan nodded. Together they made their way down the last few floors.

GRÍMNIR

'IT WAS ALL SUPPOSED TO BE SO PERFECT,' CREACHMHAOIL SAID. 'I WOULD BE the one to save the Seelie Court from destruction. I was going to find the answer, rejuvenate the races, give them a future. It seemed so simple. We knew Cú Roí and his Therians derived power from the humans, and such power, too! You have no idea how much potential the humans have. They evolve, they grow, they change. Eventually, they will be gods.'

'But us? The Elves? The Ifrit? The Jötnar? Even the Svartálfar are a stagnant race. We don't change. We are immortal, and as such we stay the same in perpetuity. It is a paradox, I know, but a race of immortals is doomed to die out, whereas these mortal things have the chance to last for an eternity.'

'I want eternity. I fear the other option. I have lived long enough to know that nothing comes afterwards; for us at least. But the magic is dying, and without it we must wither and disappear. The Tower will collapse and fall to whatever mysteries it hangs above. The races will be forgotten, and the damned humans will keep on going, spreading through the stars no doubt, like some intergalactic plague.'

'So much power. Cú Roí could tap it, but you two chose to banish him. You tried to kill him! Morons! Could you not see what you held in your hands?'

'Yes,' the Maiden said gently. 'That was why we had to destroy him.' They were still in the Blind Room. Grímnir watched Creachmhaoil closely. The Elf

seemed somehow deflated: a dull copy of himself. When he first came into the Blind Room, he had stared at the two of them for hours. Then he began to speak. To confess, really. Grímnir had no sympathy for him.

‘Cú Roí was the key. He was the answer. If we could learn to modify ourselves with that ability to live off the humans, then we could potentially live forever.’

‘Parasitically?’

‘Symbiotically! Do you not think the humans would have benefited from this? For years, we have treated them as nothing but curiosities to be toyed with – entertainment for the Courts. If we had recognised their value, we could have mentored them: we could have made them great. Our races could have lived together forever. If a few had to be sacrificed – well, it’s not something they haven’t done before.’

‘No, what I did was a good thing: A wise thing.’ He was cut off by a sound outside. It was a strange noise but Grímnir recognised it. Creachmhaoil obviously didn’t, because he tilted his head to one side and frowned.

‘It is the Twisted, Creachmhaoil. I think you had better shut the door.’

‘That’s impossible,’ the Elf scoffed. The noise of sudden, violent conflict drifted into the Blind Room. Ifrit yelled battle cries and screams of fear. The howling got louder.

‘Either close the door or cut me free,’ Grímnir insisted. ‘It is the Twisted.’

‘No!’ Creachmhaoil shrieked as he ran forwards and slammed the door shut against the sound of the massacre outside.

Camhlaidh

THEY RAN AND HID, HID AND RAN. CAM AND ROWAN DIDN’T FIND IT TOO difficult to avoid the legions of Ifrit running to do battle. They slipped between

their lines and followed the building line around towards the Blind Room. Soon they were away from the slaughter. There were small groups of ORCs that had also found their way around the Ifrit battlefield, but Cam dispatched them easily.

Forty minutes after re-entering Kilmanoi's Hall, they reached the Blind Room. It was unguarded. Outside, there was a swathe of ORC corpses. The ash on the floor was ankle deep. They went inside. Cam surveyed the room. His eyes narrowed when his gaze fell on Creachmhaoil.

'What happened, Creachmhaoil?' Cam asked.

Grímnir turned his head and smiled when he saw him. 'Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha,' he said. 'I am glad you are well.'

'Where's Dow?'

'Unfortunately, Dow Sé Mochaomhog became a liability, and I had to dispose of him.' Creachmhaoil laughed, but the sound was bitter and sad.

'You killed him,' Cam stated quietly.

'He would never have understood. It wasn't my fault. The spells were worked out properly ... There was no way I could have foreseen what would happen.'

'Tell me,' Cam demanded.

'I studied it, you see. I went through everything I could – every last scrap of research that had been done on Cú Roí. It seemed simple to alter the construct of an Elf: to make one like the Therians. I ... I ...'

'You caused The Transmogrification, didn't you?' Cam asked.

'It was a justified risk. The Firstcomer explained it to me. I was trying to save a race!'

'Instead you nearly destroyed it.'

'It shouldn't have happened,' Creachmhaoil insisted. 'My calculations were perfect. I can still make it right.'

'Where did it happen?'

Creachmhaoil's head sank to his breast, his eyes closing. 'Here. Just outside this accursed room. I thought that if anything did go wrong, then we could retreat here quickly, and any magical fallout could be contained.'

'You used an Elf? Who?'

‘One of my students volunteered. She was called Peyre. Peyre Mac Uaithne. A most promising young woman. The magic was designed to alter her spirit. Open it to the human magic. She would have become a hybrid. A creature of both worlds. Just like the Therians. Just like Cú Roí. She would have been our new miracle. Our salvation.’

‘But Peyre ripped everybody’s throat out instead,’ Cam said. ‘She didn’t need magic to do it, did she? She used her hands. And her teeth. The Blind Room was no protection at all.’ He harrumphed. ‘A single point of origin, just like I said.’ There was no triumph, just sadness in his voice.

Creachmhaoil looked up and his eyes flashed with sudden anger. ‘And you are so clever, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha? Sitting amongst the humans, drinking yourself into oblivion, forsaking your race.’

‘I might have gone and hidden away. Turned my back. But I never did any harm. You’re guilty of genocide.’

‘It was an accident,’ Creachmhaoil hissed.

‘It was negligent, immoral, and stupid,’ Cam hissed back.

‘And soon it will be made right.’

‘What do you mean?’

Creachmhaoil smiled slyly. ‘Damballah came to me. He located Cú Roí in the ether, floating through time. We brought him back ... but that awful creature Morgan Leach found him before we did, hence this small trouble in the human world.’

‘You brought him back?’ Grímnir roared from where he was bound against the wall.

‘And you too, you great ape,’ Creachmhaoil shouted back. ‘Show some gratitude.’ His voice settled. ‘Damballah has gone to get him now; with a living template, it should be a simple thing to understand where I went wrong last time.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Cam said. ‘Let them go.’

‘Or what? You and your human will attack me? You are nothing compared to me, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha. Your father could have beaten me, but a wretch like you can do nothing.’

‘A lot’s changed,’ Cam said. He lifted his arm and pointed it towards his old Master.

‘What? And what’s that? A pretty tattoo?’ Creachmhaoil laughed. ‘Even if it has some quality I am not aware of – and I think you’re bluffing – you are inside the Blind Room!’

Cam looked down at his feet, which were just over the threshold. He looked back up at Creachmhaoil. ‘Of course, you’re right.’ Cam backed out. The cries of dying Ifrit came from far away. He faced the old Elf through the open door. ‘Is that better?’

A flash of blinding white fire spun from his arm and cut Creachmhaoil’s left leg off at the knee. Creachmhaoil screamed and fell to the floor. Cam ran to Grímnir and quickly untied him. Rowan freed the Maiden.

‘It is good to see you, Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha.’

‘You too, Grímnir. Come on, let’s get out of here.’ The howling was getting louder. Closer. ‘It won’t be long until the zombie apocalypse stumbles into this place.’

‘You cannot leave me here,’ Creachmhaoil said desperately, his face twisted in pain, his hands clamped over the cauterised stump of his thigh.

‘Why not?’ Cam asked bluntly.

‘I am the only one who can save the races!’

‘Listen to that noise,’ Cam shouted at him. ‘Listen to the howling madness outside! That’s all you have done. You killed us, turned us into things of nightmare. Zombies, for Christ’s sake!’

‘If you don’t take me, that noise will consume everything: The Tower and the races will be destroyed; the immortals will die. That howling will be our death song! Don’t you understand? Without me there is no future, and we will all die with that horror in our ears. I can save us! The Seed – The Seed is in Grímnir ...’

‘No, it is not.’ The Maiden’s voice was calm. Cam looked at her. She stood in her filthy clothes, bruised and beaten, rubbing her wrists, yet she still looked like a goddess. ‘You were wrong about that, just as you were wrong about so much, Creachmhaoil. The Seed is not here.’

‘You lie!’ Creachmhaoil screamed. ‘You lie! Camhlaidh Ó Gríobhtha, can you not hear the lie in her voice? She is a deceiver; only I can save you. Only I can give you the immortality you crave. Help me – you must let me save us! You will die without me!’

‘I’ll take my chances, you lunatic. Maybe you can explain your theories to the zombies – they’ll be here any minute to talk to you about them.’

‘We’re the same, you and I! We both didn’t trust The Tower to do the right thing. The only difference is you left while I stayed and acted. Don’t you understand? It was the only way!’

‘I am nothing like you.’

‘You must help me!’ Creachmhaoil whined. Cam snapped. He stalked over to the prostrate Elf and kicked him in the face with the toe of his boot. Creachmhaoil’s nose burst, and blood went everywhere as he fell backwards.

‘Help you? Like you helped Dow? Like you helped my father!’ Cam bellowed. He kicked him again and again until Rowan’s gentle hand drew him away. Panting, Cam looked down at the traitor. Creachmhaoil groaned and then rolled over. One eye was swollen shut, but the other stared at him desperately.

‘Please,’ the old Elf begged. Cam turned and walked away. He sensed the others following him. Creachmhaoil began to cry. Cam ignored the pathetic noises and left him to the Twisted.

JESSICA

THERE WAS A HUGE MISCONCEPTION WITHIN BRITAIN ABOUT WHAT THE POLICE did. Television and books, and memories of what ‘Bobbies’ used to be like, had created a myth. Jessica Homes had been a police officer since 2003. Over the last five years, she had experienced first-hand the reality of modern-day policing.

By and large it was rewarding work. Oh, it was difficult, dangerous on

occasion, and the abuse she received as a matter of course was, when she thought about it rationally, quite disgusting: she couldn't remember how many times someone had threatened to track her down and rape her to death. The hours could be incredibly long, she was constantly tired, and any thoughts of settling down and having a family seemed to have evaporated into the murky depths of 'maybe next year'.

For every person she helped, there were a hundred drunk, obnoxious morons who were just wasting her time. More often than not, when she tried to bring an investigation to court, she would be frustrated by the criminal justice system.

Then again, for all the frustrations, that one person whose life she could make better ... well, it made it all worthwhile.

That had all changed today. She had seen things today that rather put everything else in perspective. The police service had come up against something that possessed no respect for law and order and did not stop when it saw a uniform. Today, she faced monsters that had torn most of her friends to shreds. She only survived because an Elf – an Elf! – had rescued her and got her out of the city. That was a very strange experience, not least because he was so beautiful, she found herself quite infatuated.

After they got back to the police station, the Elf disappeared. She wandered around in a daze for a while until a panicked sergeant grabbed her and asked her what she was doing.

Quite honestly, she replied 'nothing'. The sergeant took her to a briefing room that was filled with a rag-tag group of cops. There were some officers from her shift, an MIT detective called Chris who looked like he couldn't quite work out how he'd ended up there, some dishevelled PCSOs, and a scattering of specialist operations types. She was pushed towards an armed police officer – who she now knew was called Dave – and they were told to set up a roadblock on Great Street. Nobody was to go in, and Dave was authorised to use lethal force to stop anything coming out.

Jessica pointed out that she had seen one of these things, and she knew bullets weren't much good. Everybody glared at her and she shrugged. She knew Great Street – it was quiet and out of the way, and she figured it was as good a

place as any to see in the apocalypse. They had all run through the station and out to their vehicles. It had felt very gung-ho for a bit.

Now here they were, hours later, standing either side of a parked police Range Rover in uncomfortable silence. It was starting to get dark. Dave had lost his partner to a huge monster outside the Beetham Tower. Jessica could see dents and scrapes along one side of the Range Rover and could imagine the terror Dave must have felt when the thing threw itself at his car. She hadn't asked, though: she didn't really want to know.

What she did know was that she was in shock. She was far too calm not to be. Still, it allowed her to think clearly about the last five years of her life, and she realised she had done her bit. She had helped where she could. She had done some good, but now it was time for her to move on. After what she had seen today, she realised that next year might never come. She wanted to live. She wanted a child. She didn't want to be stood on this street, a stone's throw from Judgement Day. She didn't want to be a police officer anymore.

An enormous sense of relief washed through her, and she relaxed for what felt like the first time in half a decade. She was going to quit. She was about to turn to Dave and tell him so, when a car entered Great Street from Great Ancoats. It slowly drove towards them, heading into the city.

It was a black Lamborghini Reventón: a monster of a car. The engine growled at them. Dave pulled his gun and pointed it at the driver's window.

'Get out of the car!' he shouted. His voice seemed strangely high-pitched.

For a moment, there was no movement. Jessica watched, horrified, as Dave's index finger began to tighten. Then the driver's door opened, and a man got out. He was tanned, possibly of Mediterranean descent, tall and slim, with very dark eyes. He looked to be around twenty-five and had short-cropped black hair. Handsome, in a cold sort of way, Jessica thought idly. He was also covered in blood. His hands and shirt were stained red.

'Get on your knees,' Dave shouted. 'Do it now.'

'I have to pass,' the blood-soaked man said in a voice without an accent.

'On your knees!'

'I have to pass!' the man shouted back, his face contorted with anger. Jessica

had a sudden, uncontrollable urge to shout ‘you ... shall not ... pass!’ back at him, but before she could even start to form the words there was a crack, so loud and unexpected, it made her jump. Her ears began to ring, and she couldn’t hear anything else. The smell of cordite wafted over to her. She saw the blood-soaked man jerk backwards, his head exploding as the bullet passed through it, tossing him to the ground like a rag doll.

‘Jesus wept,’ she whispered. She looked at Dave. He was very pale. He looked back at her.

‘He came at us,’ he said forcibly. ‘He was coming right for us!’

‘What? You just shot him!’

‘He came at us!’ Dave cried and turned the gun on Jessica. She stared down the muzzle. It was still smoking slightly. In that moment, she knew that Dave was going to kill her. He had lost it. His eyes were wide and fever-filled, his lips were twitching uncontrollably.

‘Don’t do it,’ she said as calmly as she could. Her bladder was suddenly very full. Her waist-high police-issue trousers conspired with her body armour and utility belt to push her insides to bursting point.

‘He came at us,’ Dave whispered. There was a noise to their right, and they both turned to face it. The blood-soaked man was climbing to his feet, his face covered in his own gore and brain matter, though the skull beneath it seemed perfectly formed.

Slowly, he wiped a pool of sticky bone shards from his right eye and stared at the two police officers disapprovingly. He reached into his car and pulled out a long silver sword that appeared to have rainbows forged into its blade. Dave screamed and unloaded the rest of his clip at the man.

Most of them missed, slamming into the Lamborghini, smashing its windscreen and ricocheting off its angular front. Some hit the blood-soaked man who took a couple of steps backwards until he was sitting over the bumper of the low car. The bullets only seemed to annoy him. Jessica watched as the bullet holes quickly healed over. Then Dave’s gun was empty. He clicked the trigger a few more times and stopped.

‘I don’t like being shot. It itches,’ the man said. ‘Get out of here before I

make you eat that gun.’ Dave stared at him for a second, and then he turned and ran for the Range Rover. Jessica watched him go. The car did a quick U-turn and disappeared. Jessica remembered her radio. She moved a hand towards it, then let it drop. She simply didn’t care anymore.

‘Are you one of them?’ she asked the man. ‘An Elf?’

He looked at her curiously. ‘What do you know of Elves?’

‘One saved my life earlier today. He killed one of those things.’

‘Really? And where are those things now?’

Jessica weighed up her options. She had heard that the monsters had vanished into the Beetham Tower. She looked at the Lamborghini again. It was beautiful, even without a windscreen. She looked at her watch. It was half-past three.

She thought about safety, she thought about children, she thought about quitting ... she thought she could do all those things after she had taken this strange man to the Beetham Tower.

Whatever else he might be, he was bulletproof and obviously really pissed with the monsters. Perhaps he could fight them. Kill them. Perhaps this man could bring sanity back to the world. Jessica wanted to run – she really did – but she had not quit yet. She had sworn an oath, and as silly as it was, she still believed in it. She still had a duty. If there was anything she could do to fix this, she had to.

Besides, all she needed to do was drop him outside. It wasn’t like she had to go into the building with him ... and the car was fast ... really fast. It would be safe enough.

‘What the hell,’ she said. ‘I’ll take you to them if you’ll let me drive.’

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GRÍMNIR LED THEM AWAY FROM THE WALLS OF THE HALL INTO THE SHANTY town. He headed for the nearest Ring. It was too dangerous to do anything except escape as soon as possible. Fires burned everywhere, the combusting bodies of the Ifrit guard overwhelmed and ripped to pieces by the rending claws and tearing teeth of the ORCs. In their death throes, the Ifrit set their killers alight, and the burning Twisted floundered chaotic and screeching through the hall. The fires spread.

Cam watched as an Ifrit, its arm leaking smoke and fire from a deep gash, was knocked to the floor nearby. The ORC that attacked the Ifrit burrowed its face into the exposed neck and fire surged out of the wound. The dead creature's eyes were seared away in an instant, its flesh blackening and peeling back to reveal the bone beneath. The hapless creature began running in circles, lashing out at anything that came close to it. Some of the other Twisted were gouged by its flailing fingers and set upon it, one holding it down while two more pulled its head from its shoulders. The three began tearing at its rotting flesh as soon as it stopped struggling.

Around Cam and his companions were a series of running battles between the remaining Ifrit and the horde. Flames shot from the eyes and hands of the fleeing Ifrit and cut blistering swathes through the mob of monsters. Yet everywhere Cam looked, he saw Ifrit overwhelmed and dragged to the floor. Fortunately, Ifrit ignited when they died. If they had been Elves, those killed outright would have been turning in the grip of The Transmogrification by now. As it was, they self-cremated, the perfect soldiers to fight the infection. Unfortunately, their deaths had set the wooden shanty town in a hellish conflagration. In the dancing heat, the Twisted hunted for new victims.

It was a confusing and frightening game of cat and mouse. The fires belched thick, choking smoke that blinded them. The flames cast shimmering shadows, concealing movement. Cam could never tell when a crowd of Twisted or a squad of Ifrit might stumble out from between the stalls. When they did, a vicious free-for-all would begin and end in moments. They slipped past huge melees where groups of Ifrit desperately fought off howling zombies. On one occasion, they saw hundreds of ORCs swarming a beleaguered phalanx of Ifrit making a slow

retreat to nowhere.

Finally, they found a Ring. ‘Where will it take us?’ Rowan asked as they began to walk around it.

‘Who cares?’ Cam said as he unleashed a rolling wave of hellfire on twenty or so ORCs that were running towards them. For a moment they resembled candle flames, then their ashes were blasted away. ‘Keep going.’

Firelight faded, and the glowing spots appeared on the ground to guide them. They made their way around and around, and slowly the screams of the Twisted and their prey leached away. Muted light swelled about them, and they stood on a green hill beneath a cold sky and a biting wind. The hill ran down to a beach, and a choppy sea stretched out beyond it. On the horizon was a smudge of land.

‘Where are we?’ Cam asked, shivering. ‘Somewhere in the north?’

‘Possibly. It’s chilly enough,’ Rowan said. The hill was covered in wiry grass and little else. A bemused sheep stood twenty feet away. It bleated, then turned and ran from them. ‘What now?’

‘We keep going,’ the Maiden said. ‘Through to The Tower at Dusk. There, we should be able to find the Ring that brought you from Manchester – that is where Cú Roí is. That is where Grímnir and I need to be.’

‘It’s nice here,’ Cam mumbled. He lay on the damp grass with his eyes closed, the shotgun at his side. The tattoo on his arm sparked in the weak light. ‘It’s cool and the air is fresh. If we go through to The Tower at Dusk, there is an unreasonably high chance that we’ll get caught by an Ifrit or a Svartálfar.’

‘Well, we’re not going to be able to walk home from here,’ Rowan said. ‘I don’t even know where here is. If we want to get home, we need that other Ring. And it’s my understanding that if we don’t go to The Tower at Dusk, then we must go back to The Tower at Dawn. I think you’ll agree, that if we go back there right now, there’s an unreasonably high chance that we’ll get eaten.’

Cam conceded the point grumpily, then said, ‘Why don’t we just wait it out here?’

‘Our duty is not here,’ the Maiden said gently. ‘I am weak. Our races are weak. Soon we must perish, but I cannot allow Cú Roí to survive, for he will turn this land into a charnel house. My magic is spent, tied up in Grímnir and

Camulus, the last of it hidden: A Seed of hope against the darkness that is coming.'

'You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?' Cam asked.

'I have always had glimpses of the future. I foresaw that a great evil would return, and that the Courts would be too weak to fight it. I hid my power away where it could not be found ... but the portents were vague, and I did not know when Cú Roí would return. I have waited a long time for this, and I have sacrificed more than you can know. It is time to reclaim my power – it is time to destroy Cú Roí.'

'I am ready,' Grímnir said and knelt in front of the bruised yet still beautiful girl. She smiled at him and laid a slim hand on his shaggy head.

'Not more of that *Lord of the Rings* bullshit,' Cam said, sitting up. 'If we're going to die, let's try and do it with a bit of class, shall we?'

Sergei

EVENTIDE'S TWILIGHT CREPT INTO THE PENTHOUSE APARTMENT THROUGH HUGE floor to ceiling windows. It was a massive duplex, mostly open-plan, and the free-flowing rooms gave panoramic views over Manchester. It was luxurious, dotted with an eclectic selection of chairs and artwork that would have made a smaller space feel cramped. So far, Sergei had counted nine bathrooms in the duplex, and that was the least of it; Scandinavian paintings and mid-century Italian glassware were displayed in the corner living area. Colours popped against the sprawling white leather sofas and the diaphanous curtains. Glass doors led out into a twenty-foot-high gallery that ran the length of the building. It contained an olive grove. Sixteen-foot-tall trees thriving on the forty-seventh floor. Their leaves didn't stir because there was no wind, but the illusion of movement was given by a serenity pool set halfway along the grove, which

shimmered and glittered under electric lights and cast reflections on the ceiling and amongst the green foliage.

Sergei stood at the shallow pool and examined a strange sculpture that emerged from it. Nine crooked and conical pillars reached up towards the ceiling. Made of white burnished stone, they were different shapes and sizes, the largest only around half a foot tall. Sergei had no idea what they were supposed to represent. To him, they looked like the probing tentacles of a Barghest. He turned his attention to the more traditional piece set in the corner of the pool in front of the window. It was made of the same material. A human-sized blob with a couple of organic-looking holes rendered through it. It looked like a dismembered torso that had been ripped open.

Sergei grimaced and turned his back on the art. It should have been a peaceful place. All he could see were monsters and death. A kitchen and dining area led from the olive grove through to the other side of the building. On this side there were glass doors that were open. On the opposite side of the room there weren't even walls; it led out onto another gallery and more windows. It was gloomy in the kitchen. A long, dark wooden kitchen island extended to his left. A large rosewood dining table with eight matching chairs stood atop a dark blue rug. Some white pottery jugs decorated its centre. To the right, an expensive-looking sideboard, also rosewood, took up most of the wall, flanked by other bits and pieces of furniture. A big painting hung above it with smaller pieces to its left and right. There were more ornaments on top of the sideboard including, incongruously, a set of ceramic penguins.

Cú Roí sat at the head of the table facing Sergei and the olive grove. Annalise stood, still naked, at his right hand. Blood streaked her jaw and breasts, grime and dirt were ingrained into her pale skin, and her wild hair matched the wildness of her stare.

A couple of Barghest lounged on the tiled floor behind the Master, their bodies relaxed and without shape, just piles of twitching tentacles in a jellyfish mess. Sergei tried to ignore their acrid stink as he stood and waited. The day had been spent consolidating their position. The rooms below them were filled with women snatched from the streets; easy pickings after the police had withdrawn

to the city limits. They were all pregnant with the Master's get now. Others had been bitten and were locked away whilst they turned. Sergei had enjoyed himself, stalking the streets, taking his pleasure anywhere he liked with anybody he liked, until the Master had called him back.

Leach is dead. I felt his passing. He stood at my side for centuries and awaited my return for millennia. It saddens me that he is gone.

'What must we do, Master?' Annalise asked. Sergei despised the sound of worship in her voice, not because he found her a lickspittle, but because she was a competitor for the Master's attention. Sergei knew the bitch – she was the same slut Autumn had been fucking on Saturday, only a few floors below where they were stood.

'Tell us,' Sergei said quickly, eager to be heard. He ignored the flash of hatred Annalise sent his way.

Samuel Autumn has also passed, the giant said as if he hadn't heard them. He was the first to join my army when I came to this time. He was your sire, my dear, he said patting Annalise's hand. Sergei felt a spasm of jealousy at the gesture. I sympathise with you.

'He was a small man. He did not understand or appreciate what you gave him, Master,' Annalise said with a sneer.

Nevertheless, he tried to do his duty by me. He is another casualty in our war. I do not want there to be any more. The magic energy required to create a Barghest is substantial. It takes time to grow them. I cannot afford to squander any more power until we have secured this city and I can begin to drain the humans. You are now my senior lieutenants. It will be hours yet before the freshly bitten come properly into their power.

If you can hold this building while the new Barghest are spawned, you will be rewarded. If you fail me, then you will die.

'Yes, Master,' Sergei said, flashing a snide grin at Annalise for getting in there first. 'Whatever you command.'

Yes, I command it. The humans are weak and stupid, but the Courts have a hand in this, too. We must be wary of them. The threat is a man called Mark Jones – you know him, Sergei Constantine.

‘Yes, Master. He once employed me.’

He is special. I do not know why. He carries a sword. It must be returned to me. That is your main concern. Mark Jones must not pass through this building while the sword is in his hands. This is your mission, Sergei. Wait ... Cú Roí sat straight in his chair. The two Barghest behind him trembled and writhed. Sergei thought that they looked like a heap of spilled intestines twitching and contorting on unseen strings. Low growls rumbled from their boneless, fang-lined mouths.

Sergei felt it too – something was watching him. Annalise changed, her body swelling and sprouting golden fur. Sergei barely paid attention as her jaw cracked and swelled, her forehead flattened, her arms elongated, and savage talons burst from her fingertips. With a series of snaps, her bone structure altered beneath the new musculature of the beast. She roared.

Laughter came from the shadows behind the kitchen island. Something flickered within them, though there was nothing there. Confused, Sergei took a step backwards. ‘Cú Roí ... do you know what I am?’

You are a Svartálfar, yes?

‘Yes. I am the Prince of Rattlesnakes.’ Motes of dust and darkness coalesced near the oven. A man-shaped ghost appeared. He had no features. His body was black light, and a cloak of nothingness swirled around him. The blank oval of his face turned to Cú Roí. ‘I am here for you, Therian.’

You think you can kill me?

The Prince of Rattlesnakes laughed again, this time uproariously. A woman, young and innocent-looking with perfect skin and a wide, welcoming mouth, stepped into the room from behind Cú Roí. The windows on the other side of the building framed her like another piece of art. Long black hair fell in folds of silken sparkle to her ankles. Like Annalise, she was naked and like Annalise, she was beautiful. Unlike with Annalise, Sergei felt a surge of violent desire. He felt his teeth lengthen in anticipation of what he would do to this young waif.

As lust settled back, Sergei noticed other features: the dead, white eyes; the cold smile, which displayed two long, razor-sharp incisors; and the way her hair twitched and swayed around her, under its own impetus.

Something else lurched into view behind her. It blocked out the light. A

black spider thing that squatted above the other two intruders like a malignant scion of Death.

The Barghest shuddered upright as thumb-thick tendrils wove and wrapped into sinewy legs. The blind worm mouths opened, and they hissed menacingly at the globular wraith.

‘I do not want to kill you, Cú Roí. I am Damballah, leader of the Unseelie Court and The Tower at Dusk. I want you to help us. I need your power.’

As you can see, I, too, am the Master of a tower. I do not need your help and I do not share power.

‘Come now ... there is no reason that we cannot work together. My sister and I are quite taken with what you have done here in Miðgarðr. We admire your methods. Your philosophy. The chaos you sow is our religion. We quite lost ourselves when we arrived here. We have stalked these streets for hours, just as we were born to do. We have fed well today, have we not, sister?’

‘Yes brother,’ said the waif.

‘Yes, we have. Dare I even admit that I have had fun! All thanks to you, Cú Roí. I see no reason that this can’t last forever.’

You are welcome to the scraps from my table ... it seems that you have already availed yourselves of them. But you have nothing to offer me. Leave.

‘You are wrong. We can offer each other much. We are the same, you and I.’

If we are alike as you say, then I know that you will use me and then destroy me, for that is what I would do. No pacts. No deals. No compromise. Children, go to your duties. I will deal with the Svartálfar.

‘Master, we can help,’ Sergei said loyally. He was ignored.

Cú Roí stood up. His form began to swell. Sergei watched raptly as his Master finally revealed his true shape.

MAJK

GROANING, MARK DRAGGED CAMULUS FROM THE BARGHEST'S CORPSE. IT HAD appeared from nowhere, leaping through the already smashed windscreen of the car as they had approached the Beetham Tower. The Barghest's weight had crushed the front of the Lamborghini, collapsing the wheel arches onto the tyres and effectively stopping it.

Deadly tentacles had speared through the body and face of the young police officer who had insisted on driving. Her skull was malformed, and one eye had popped out of its socket. It dangled onto her cheek. Mark leant over and checked for a pulse anyway. There was nothing. The girl was dead.

He extricated himself slowly from the ruin of the Lamborghini. Suddenly angry, he used the sword to hack the creature's makeshift head from the nest of its body. He threw it to the ground and kicked it. So much death, he thought. He dropped Camulus beside it in disgust.

He had come out of his fugue after two-and-a-half-hours, filled with despair and self-loathing, and with one overwhelming need – to find the monster that had raped Tabitha and destroy it utterly. He intended to test the limits of his immortality with a direct assault. He had no subtle plan. There were no inspired strategies or clever tactics: he was going to walk up to it and shove the rainbow blade down its obscene throat. One of them would die. Mark didn't much care which of them it was.

In the quickening twilight, he could see that the Beetham Tower was a mess. Its windows were all broken, some put through, others sporting a spider web of cracks. Cars sat abandoned and burned out in front of the lobby.

Inside it was dark, the power off, still shapes in the gloom attesting to what had happened to most of the staff and guests. Sighing, Mark looked up. The tower was big. Not like the real skyscrapers that dominated Hong Kong and New York – it would be barely noticeable when compared to the megastructures in places like Dubai – but it was pretty big for England, and certainly the biggest place in Manchester.

'Why are you here, monster?' Mark asked under his breath. What did Cú Roí gain from coming to the tallest building in the city? It was barely defensible. Once at the top, there was nowhere to go. The army, if they ever arrived, could

simply turn the place into smouldering wreckage, burying everything, including Cú Roí and his legion of horrors, beneath thousands and thousands of tonnes of rubble. So why here?

It didn't matter. Not to Mark anyway. He was going up, and he was going to destroy the monster that had raped and killed Tabitha. Annaea. He had been to the Beetham Tower before and knew that there were two entrances. He stood in front of the Hilton Hotel, which went up twenty-three floors and was topped by a bar. The floors after that were private apartments. To get to them, it was necessary to go around the corner to a foyer with a concierge and two lifts.

Returning to the Lamborghini, Mark pulled the black sword from the storage compartment and slung it across his back. The hilt jutted up over his right shoulder. He had brought the sword with him on a whim – Camulus had proved itself deadly to the creatures that swarmed through Manchester, but the black sword had been forged a long time ago, its sole purpose his eternal hunt for the immortals he hated so much. He couldn't just leave it behind.

He scooped up Camulus and realised the handle was sticky with blood. Casually, he swapped it to his other hand and wiped his palm against his shirt. He felt more wetness and glancing down, he realised for the first time that his shirt was torn and covered in blood. He felt his hair, and it was stiff and matted. His face was wet with the stuff too.

Looking back to the tower, he gathered himself and set off grimly around the side and into the foyer. A couple of corpses lay in bloody ruin, the stench of their open bowels hanging in the air. The lifts were both destroyed. A pair of doors with a sign above them indicated a stairwell was nearby. Doggedly, Mark walked to the stairs and began the long trek to the forty-seventh floor.

Sergei

FIRE RAGED THROUGH THE APARTMENT, AND SERGEI DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER TO be terrified or elated. He cowered in the kitchen, protected from most of the maelstrom by the granite counter of the kitchen island unit. The cabinets below it had been ripped out by the fury of his Master. Consequently, the granite slab was propped up at a roughly forty-five-degree angle.

Every time he popped his head out to see what was going on, another gust of flame washed through the shattered window, further decimating the area where Damballah and his minions had stood. The olive grove was ablaze. The shallow pool had evaporated. Broken glass and charred rosewood splinters were everywhere. Sergei grinned. The bitch Annalise had run as soon as the Master changed.

Maybe she had seen what was coming, maybe she was obeying her orders, maybe she was just scared ... she'd had the right idea. Sergei had honestly thought he could help. Now ... well, the Master had proved his godhood once and for all. Sergei recalled the metamorphosis.

Cú Roí had hunched over and half screamed, half roared. Sergei moved towards him and then stopped. The Master's face elongated, much like Annalise's had. Then his back cleaved open like a rotten banana, and blood had sprayed everywhere. Something wriggled in the wound: something leathery and tipped with bone spikes.

As his back curved, his spine stretched with a series of awful cracking noises, and his arms and legs elongated and bulked out. He dropped to the floor and flesh began to slough away, exposing terracotta scales. The Master's ribs spread and cracked to accommodate the newer, massive limbs, and his clothes were torn to shreds along with his skin.

In place of a human head, an equine thing appeared, its long face covered in scales. Two great horns jutted from its forehead, and jagged fangs speared from its gums. Two slits devoured his nose, and his crystal eyes sank beneath deep bony ridges. The things on Cú Roí's back thrashed around, desperately trying to free themselves from the sticky pulp of his back.

Sergei stared at his Master in wonder. He looked like an old-fashioned devil, eight feet tall and bulging with muscles. Their eyes met for an instant. *The man*

Mark Jones. Find him and take the sword from him. Kill him if you can. Then the glittering, fractured eyes had turned to Damballah.

‘Your demon form does not alter anything, Cú Roí,’ the Prince of Rattlesnakes said with a yawn. Cú Roí seemed to smile, though it could have been a snarl or a twitch on that inhuman face. The spider thing moved towards Cú Roí. As if let off a leash, the two Barghest ran towards it, defending their Master. They hit it hard, their tentacles flashing out and lancing into its legs and body. Where they entered, nothing came out. Each writhing appendage was simply absorbed into the larger mass, but it seemed to hurt it. The larger monstrosity skittered backwards and raised two of its five thick legs. It tried to spear the two smaller creatures but the Barghest were too quick, and if they were hurt by the loss of their tentacles, they didn’t show it.

As they fought, Cú Roí shambled past Sergei and splashed ponderously towards the window, through the pool in the olive grove. Sergei watched, bewildered, and then fear rushed through him as he realised what was about to happen.

‘Master,’ he had called. ‘Do not leave me!’

It was too late – Cú Roí crashed through the thick glass and disappeared into the drop beyond. Cold wind rushed into the building. Sergei rushed to the window, his orders forgotten as he splashed through the pool. He stared out, ignoring his wet feet. Why had his Master done this? Why had he thrown himself into the abyss?

A rattling screech made him look back. The black spider had one of the Barghest pinned to the floor. It thrashed maniacally, losing all shape as it drove its barbed limbs into the featureless mass of the spider. Sergei stood at the window and watched. The other Barghest came in behind the spider, and a thick cable of coiled tentacles slammed into one of its remaining legs so hard that a few made it out the other side without being annihilated. The leg was sheared off and it collapsed to the floor and splashed into a million beads of shadow that faded away into nothing.

A wailing sigh came from the spider. To Sergei, it was the sound of endless screaming heard from a long way away. The spider spun around, pulling free the

tapered arm pinning the first Barghest. The other one tried to back away, but it was not fast enough. With a lurching jump, the spider fell on top of it. The Barghest vanished into its inky depths.

The remaining Barghest was crippled. Most of its tentacles had gone, seared away in the spider's body. A few still thrashed around it, and it was using them to try and drag itself away. The long pink slug that was the core of its body was surrounded by quivering stumps. There was a hole through it from where it had been pinned. Steam rose from out of it but no blood. The Barghest's worm mouth worked crazily, but it didn't make a sound. The spider thing stepped towards it.

Sergei stood paralysed at the window. He thought that he should try and help, but there was nothing he could do. If only the Master had not abandoned them. There was a soft *whomp* from somewhere below, and the eddies and currents of the biting wind danced wildly. Another came, then another and another in quick succession.

Wings, Sergei realised in the second before the thing causing the disturbance appeared at the window. The massive beast – maybe a hundred feet long – had red scales and black talons. Its tail trailed behind it like a heavy streamer with a barbed tip. Its black, leather-like, thickly ridged and veined wings were almost as wide as they were long. The big, cruel head weaving at the end of its thick sinuous neck reminded Sergei of a tyrannosaur, though sleeker, more intelligent, and topped with curving horns.

Gazing at the monster with rapt enchantment, Sergei realised his Master had not abandoned him – he just hadn't the room to change properly in the big apartment. The devil form had only been the beginning. The dragon was Cú Roí's true form.

Go now, Sergei. Do my bidding or die. There was no affection in the dragon's mind voice. Sergei turned and used all of his preternatural speed and agility to throw himself behind the kitchen counter before the penthouse was flooded with intense heat.

The first time he looked back up, the counter was on its side and the dining area was a blackened and charred wreck. The windows through the other side of

the room, where the naked woman had been stood, had vanished, and the metal frames glowed a dull red. A violent cross wind whistled through the apartment. The black creature with five legs was still standing, though most of the top of its globular body had been blasted away. Slowly, it collapsed to the side. It hit the floor and splashed; the darkness that formed it dribbling away into cracks and shadows. There was no sign of the other Barghest.

Damballah was gone. The girl appeared from behind a burning tree shrieking her hatred at the dragon, which hovered outside. More fire washed in, and Sergei was forced to duck back under cover.

Now he was cornered by his own Lord. The female kept materialising from dark corners to howl at his Master. Sergei could not quite comprehend how she was making it here and there. Something to his side emerged from the shadows and threw itself at him. He caught the girl in one steely hand and pushed her snapping fangs away from his face. Something inside him stirred. The monster that had entered him when he was bitten finally awoke. He felt his own change like a dream. It hurt. It hurt a lot, but it was a sweet agony that aroused him. He roared his own glee as he wrestled with the vampire, his therianthropic lust revelling in the fight.

The girl was strong and was obviously used to overcoming her prey through that alone. She fought with the grace of an alley cat. Pure ferocity might have seen her through against a lesser opponent, but Sergei was ex-KGB, a Cold War remnant: a mercenary captain of lethal skill. Her flailing arms were easy enough to catch and twist. In the end, he was too experienced for her. She made some weird eyes at him and he felt a mild tugging at the back of his mind, but he shrugged it off, putting it down to the change that was sliding over him.

Panicking, she pulled back towards the shadows, and Sergei felt his grip on her arm loosen as her flesh became insubstantial. Instinctively, he pulled her out from beneath the counter. Dancing firelight that shimmered hazily through plumes of smoke fell upon her, and shadow became flesh once again. The girl thrashed around madly, hissing all the time, and Sergei used his strength to twist her wrist. She yelped, and the struggling stopped.

Looking down at his arm, he saw it was covered in thick black fur. Muscles

bulged beneath his pelt. His tongue licked out over long sharp teeth. The Master was at the window, his great lithe body undulating in the air, four massive scaled limbs hanging below, tucked up and streamlined. The great mouth opened. Sergei thrust the girl to the floor and leapt back behind the granite counter.

Heat and flame roared around him, like hell itself was rolling through the apartment. When Sergei looked back, there was no trace of the girl. The fire had wiped her from existence. *You did well. Now go. Find Mark Jones.*

Sergei went, his blood singing in anticipation.

MARK

WHEN HE REACHED FLOOR THIRTY, MARK WAS AMBUSHED BY FOUR IFRIT warriors. He had no idea where they had come from and he didn't care. It was a short, brutal fight, and Mark initially came off worse.

Flames racked his body until he was nothing more than a shrivelled husk, skin blackened, and eyes melted in his head. He collapsed, the clawed stubs of his fingers still gripping Camulus tightly. A heavy boot came down on his forehead and he felt his skull fracture and split. The black sword dug into his back beneath the assault. The pain was incredible, and for a moment, he nearly lost consciousness.

He beat it in the end, though. Pain was nothing new to Mark, and he was well practised in the arts of containing it and channelling it. Quickly, the flesh of his body regenerated. His skull swelled, and his eyes re-formed just in time for him to see one of the Ifrit, its flaming eyes roaring in their sockets, reach for Camulus.

Mark wrenched it up, and the tip of the blade took the Ifrit in the stomach. The Ifrit groaned and doubled over. Boiling blood splashed onto Mark's face, and gouts of fire leapt from the wound. Mark pulled Camulus out and slashed upwards. The creature staggered backwards out of the way and then stumbled to

its knees. Mark pushed himself to his feet, already whole again, though his clothes were burned rags, streaked in blood and the charcoal residue of his own skin.

Stepping forwards, he slashed the head from the injured Ifrit. It died, and its body combusted immediately. The other Ifrit backed away uncertainly. Mark brushed ash from his chest.

They were ill-equipped to deal with an immortal carrying an immortal-killing sword. The fire they washed him with barely slowed him, the claws they raked over his body only galvanised him, and Camulus took three more lives in quick succession. Mark stood amongst the ruin of their smouldering corpses for a few seconds, and then he carried on upward.

When he got to the fortieth floor, he found it ablaze and treacherous. Screams came from a corridor that led off from the stairwell. Mark hesitated, but only for a moment. He ran into a narrow corridor with apartments leading off it. The doors were all nailed shut.

Camulus smashed through the doors like they were paper. In the first room, he found a woman lying in a state of disarray, naked and pinned to the floor by the huge mass of her pregnant belly. She reached an imploring hand out to Mark. Black smoke was filling the room from somewhere. He stepped forwards to help her and then stopped. She was doomed. The thing in her stomach would kill her if the smoke did not. At least with the smoke, her passing would be peaceful.

Turning, he ran back into the corridor, ignoring the sob-choked begging of the woman he left behind. The next room was the same, and the next and the next.

By the time Camulus tore through the fifth door, Mark was beginning to give up hope. This time though, the woman in the birthing room was on her feet, the pregnancy developed but not debilitating. She waddled past Mark, barely looking at him, and staggered off towards the stairwell.

Mark thought about going after her. She was infected and the thing in her stomach would kill many if it got free. Then he decided against it – let her take her own chances, he thought. There may still be women in these rooms who had not suffered the ministrations of Cú Roí: if he could save them, maybe he could

save some small part of Annaea.

It was ridiculous, he knew. Tabitha was dead, but he needed something, anything, to ease the pain of his failure. He went through the sixth door, determined to do what he could. The room was on fire. Smoke heaved around the walls, and the paint on the ceiling bubbled and spat. The furniture to Mark's right was an inferno, and the windows at the rear were blackened and cracked. A woman stood facing him, her belly swollen and heavy, a large kitchen knife clutched in her right hand.

'You aren't going to take my baby,' she hissed, her voice filled with insane rage, her eyes wild and wide. She threw herself at him, and Mark brought Camulus around automatically.

He shouted with horror as the sword bit deep, and her warm blood splashed across his hands and face.

ROWAN

THE TOWER AT DUSK WAS DARK AND QUIET. IFRIT COULD BE SEEN MOVING around in the distance of Kilmanoi's Hall. Several fires burned, but after the hell of the ORC-infested Tower at Dawn, it was easy for the group to navigate back to the Ring that would return them to Manchester.

'Why is it so quiet?' Cam wondered out loud as they walked.

'The Unseelie Court used this place to access Earth,' the Maiden said. 'Now, with the magic dying, fewer and fewer are going through. They tend to restrict themselves to the higher levels and the top of The Tower. We are perfectly safe, as long as we stay quiet.' It was good advice and the small group took it, lapsing into silence as they headed back to the portal that would return them to Manchester.

Gartside Street was just the way Rowan remembered it – a mess of roadworks. It was good to be back home, even if home was in the tight grip of a shitstorm. He shivered in the December cold and looked up into the bruise of dusk. A haze of dark cloud, laced with a throbbing orange glow, was smeared across it. He frowned. That wasn't cloud ... he wrinkled his nose. 'Can anyone else smell burning?'

Grímnir grunted something in his musical language, and then the big Jötnar walked towards Deansgate with the Maiden at his side. Rowan looked at Cam questioningly.

'He says,' Cam coughed and started speaking in a low growl. "'Let us get moving. My time is now.'" The Elf rolled his eyes theatrically. Together they walked after him.

When they reached Deansgate, Rowan's mouth dropped open. 'Oh my God!' he said. The words weren't sufficient. Manchester was on fire.

The top half of the Beetham Tower was blazing. A giant plume of smoke stretched up to the sky, turning it black and angry. Flames shot from the windows near the top. Rowan could only imagine the inferno that raged inside.

Beside it, the Great Northern Warehouse had ignited. The entire roof was subsumed beneath roaring red flames that lashed twenty feet into the air. Rowan had seen similar trails of fire before in movies; it looked like the building had been hit by a napalm air strike.

Behind the Great Northern Warehouse, more smoke climbed into the air. Rowan looked left and saw other buildings along Deansgate burning merrily, too.

In front of him, shop fronts were cracked open and the goods inside were being quickly consumed by fires so bright that he had to shield his eyes against them. The heat was immense; Rowan felt sweat popping out on his forehead.

The sound of an angry ocean came to their ears. It was the sound of half a city burning. 'What caused this?' Rowan asked. The Maiden pointed up into the bleak, apocalyptic sky.

Between pillars of roiling black smoke, a bird swooped in the final flush of the setting sun. Slowly, his eyes worked out the distance and he squinted. 'What

is it?’ he asked. As if in answer, the object sent a stream of fire down onto the buildings below it. Something went up in a mushroom of flame. They heard the dull thud of the explosion from where they stood.

‘We have to get to the Beetham Tower,’ Cam said grimly. The fingers around the dragon head of his tattoo twitched as Cam reached up and absently kneaded the shotgun slung over his shoulder. Rowan watched as the thing above them flapped its immense wings and flew towards them. As it got closer, he began to truly appreciate its size. He also began to make out details.

‘Good God, it’s a dragon,’ he said flatly. ‘Why am I surprised?’

‘It is Cú Roí,’ the Maiden said.

‘You knew he could turn into that ... thing ... and you didn’t tell us?’ Cam said accusingly.

The Maiden didn’t answer.

‘Listen, guys, I don’t want to be a killjoy or anything,’ said Rowan, ‘but in the world of Top Trumps, that thing’s got solid tens all the way down. We might push a seven or eight if we’re lucky. The army’ll flatten it eventually, and it’s too late to save much of the city. If we go up there after it, we’re dead. We haven’t got a hope in Hell. Let’s be sensible.’

Grímnir asked Cam something in his language, and the Elf spoke back. Rowan got the feeling that he was translating. Grímnir said something else and Cam turned to Rowan. ‘He says, “You do not strike me as a coward, human,”’ Cam said in a mock deep voice that earned a disapproving scowl from Grímnir. Cam shrugged apologetically.

Rowan bridled. ‘There’s bravery and there’s suicide. We walk into that tower, and we’re going to burn. If we get to the top, it’ll most likely collapse on us. Even if it doesn’t, there’s no guarantee that thing will come anywhere near us, and if it does, we’ve not got a snowball’s chance of surviving, let alone of beating it.’

‘Have faith, Rowan,’ the Maiden said. ‘The time of greatest dark is often the moment we shine the brightest.’ She smiled at him and then followed Grímnir, who was already walking towards the Beetham Tower.

Rowan looked at Cam. ‘You see the fantasy book nonsense I’ve got to put up

with?’ Cam asked.

‘What do we do?’

‘I’m going with them. You should go and look for your sister – that’s the only reason you’re here. Autumn said she escaped.’

‘And you trust him? Besides, I’ve got nowhere else to look. My sister’s probably up there if she’s still alive.’ Rowan felt a rush of deep fear at the idea that Tabby might be dead. He pushed it away. ‘She *is* still alive,’ he said to himself defiantly. ‘She has to be. I suppose I’ve got no choice.’

Cam laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘You’ve always got a choice. I’ll look for her, Rowan. If I find her, I’ll do everything I can to bring her out safely.’

‘Yeah, well I appreciate it. But you might need an extra pair of hands. I’m coming along. I must be mad.’

Cam said, ‘I’m glad.’

‘The moment I find my sister, I’m out of there, though. I’m not scared of anything, but a dragon? I’m outclassed.’

‘I understand. Come on, they’re getting ahead.’

They caught up with Grímnir and the Maiden who were stood in front of the entrance to the apartments. Grímnir was a step or two ahead of the Maiden, his face turned up to the smoking ruin of the building. His tattoos coruscated in firelight diffused by smoke. His beard and hair were wild and elemental, his limbs thick and strong. Rowan thought he looked like a Norse god, ready to take his wrath to his enemy: Thor, ready to fight the Midgårdsormen. For a second, he believed he could probably win as well.

As Grímnir started towards the entrance, the smudged heavens were blotted out by the wings of the dragon. Its roar shook the earth, and glass fell from broken windows high above. Rowan looked up at the glittering red body and knew instinctively that if he set foot in the building, he would die. He pictured Tabby, alone and frightened somewhere above him. He pictured himself on the motorbike, fleeing the mansion.

Taking a deep breath, Rowan followed the three immortals into the smoky ruin of the dragon’s lair.

Sergei

SERGEI RAN THROUGH THE SILVER DARKNESS AND REVELLED IN THE POWER OF HIS limbs. He was finally complete. No longer just a man with a talent for death, now he was Death. A god amongst men. The sound of screaming came from all around, but he didn't care. The Master was with him, deep in his head, guiding his rapacious glee; spurring him on and driving his bloodlust.

A pregnant woman lurched out in front of him. Sergei wondered idly how she had escaped the birthing rooms even as he dragged a razor-sharp fingernail across her belly, spilling the Barghest to the floor. It was a small beast compared to its brethren: an aborted thing of writhing slime and wailing flesh, but it still turned upon the woman that spawned it and drove its worm teeth into her chest, tearing at her left breast and burrowing through to her heart. The woman embraced it as she died.

Sergei laughed at her demise, spitting a wad of phlegm onto the parasitical mass. His human form returned, unbidden – he still couldn't control it properly. Angered, Sergei kicked at the mewling Barghest and it snapped at his toes. He laughed again as he ran onwards.

Strength and hunger drove him through the dark corridors. Ahead, he heard a shout of pain and he altered his course, moving towards it. Ducking down a narrow passage, he sped through the chaos and into a wide room that was on fire.

Before him stood a filthy, blood-covered man holding a silver sword. A second sword with a black hilt stuck out above his right shoulder. At the man's feet lay a butchered woman, her belly thrashing with another Barghest's death throes. Sergei clenched his fists in the anticipation of violence. His jaw distended and his teeth elongated; thick black fur sprouted on his face. Sergei roared, and the man lifted his eyes from the corpse.

‘First, you feel confidence,’ the bloody man said in a calm voice. With a slight thrill, Sergei realised it was Mark Jones, dirty and haggard. The anticipation of killing his former employer and gaining his Master’s praise sang in his veins.

Sergei threw himself forwards, his fingers cracking as they became talons, his ribs bending and his spine breaking as the change took him. His thin frame swelled to monstrous proportions.

He cannoned into Mark. His talons ripped bloody gashes across his chest, and he drove Mark’s body to the floor with his altered weight. The silver sword spun from his victim’s hand and clattered into the pyre. Sergei’s bear’s muzzle ripped into the cartilage and gristle of the man’s shoulder.

Wrenching left then right, he pulled away a great goblet of flesh, practically decapitating his victim, and savoured the spurt of thick blood that sluiced his mouth and drenched his nostrils in a copper mist. Sergei stepped back to swallow what he had won, and lost himself in the flavour. Turning back, jaws open, he snapped at where Mark’s arm should be. Clashing jaws closed on nothing.

‘Now there’s doubt.’ Again, the voice was calm, almost soothing. Sergei spun to find Mark whole and unharmed beside the fire. The skin around his neck was pale and clean compared to the filth covering the rest of his body. The silver sword still lay in the fire, the other one was still sheathed across Mark’s back. He didn’t reach for it.

Confusion was quickly replaced by the doubt Mark had suggested. The change suddenly deserted Sergei. He felt the brawny muscles of the beast fading into his normal, narrow frame. Mark watched the transformation coldly, then took a step towards him.

Sergei reverted to what he knew best; he dropped into a fighter’s stance and waited for Mark to come within reach. The blade of the Russian’s hand caved in Mark’s throat. A kick knocked Mark back into a pile of flaming furniture, and the stench of burning flesh wafted up into Sergei’s eager nose.

‘There’s your doubt, *dolboeb!*’ he swore in Russian. ‘I’m going to eat you medium rare!’ Even as he shouted, Sergei realised he was salivating.

‘And finally, there’s fear,’ the voice croaked from within the inferno. A human torch stepped out from the fire, its body a skeletal mass of charred meat, eyes burned away, tendons exposed beneath blackened flesh, hair gone, and a scalp flayed to expose a charcoal skull.

Sergei stared nonplussed as the ghoul reached towards him and grabbed his throat with claw-like hands. Terror surged through Sergei. For a moment he was back in Bosnia, and every innocent he had murdered with bullet and flame was reaching for him.

Tears drove up through the corners of his eyes as the skull pushed its way into his face. Sergei felt his bladder and bowels go as the apparition’s foetid stink squirmed into his nose. Incredibly strong bony fingers dragged him back into the searing heat.

Only when the flames licked at his body did Sergei begin to fight back, but by then it was too late. The empty sockets of the grinning skull bored into him; its lipless mouth lisped awkward words as the thing drove him deep into the fire.

‘And now you know death. Burn in hell, you traitorous bastard!’ Its teeth clattered against each other as it spoke, the deep nasal passages glittered with ash, and the empty eyes scoured what was left of his soul. Sergei screamed as the true immortal fed his life to the razor-edged flames of retribution.

MARK

THE RUSSIAN’S BODY BURNED. MARK HELD HIM IN THE FIRE LONG AFTER HE HAD stopped struggling. When there was nothing left but bones, Mark staggered backwards in immense pain. He stood panting in the flaming room as his body regenerated. The woman’s corpse was still and accusing.

Reaching over his shoulder, he reassured himself that the black sword was still there. The cloth hilt had burned away, and the steel beneath it was still warm. He found Camulus lying where it had fallen. He collected it numbly.

Sergei's bones were jumping in the flames. Mark stood over them and watched in disgust. Flesh was trying to grow from the blackened skeleton, but every time a tendril flashed out, the flames seared it away. Still, the fire would eventually go out ... Mark slammed Camulus into the charred ruin, raining blow after blow down into Sergei's remains until they were smashed into shards and dust. He watched until he was satisfied that no more flesh would grow back – that the Russian was truly dead – and then he turned back to the door.

Highs and lows: his life had always been a series of highs and lows. Finding Annaea and losing her, repeatedly, for millennia. Highs and lows. Killing the woman in the apartment had finally broken something inside him. Something fragile. Something that simply couldn't resist that final failure. Mark wondered if normal people were haunted by that same emotional turmoil. He wondered if they felt the mind-numbing, soul-tearing depression that filled him now. He had been so certain that it would be different this time. So sure he could protect her – technology had come so far, so fast, in the last fifty years, that he had been convinced he could keep her alive.

Instead, a flood of monsters had washed through his life and taken her from him again. This death was her most gruesome yet. Could normal people understand the emotional nadir he had reached? Could they comprehend the terrible pain that crushed him every time he saw the woman he loved die again? For all his strengths, Mark knew he was powerless. He could not change her destiny, and he could not escape the pain. Even suicide was denied him.

Walking through the Beetham Tower, uninterested in the abominations that shrieked around him, uncaring of the flames, unconcerned about the threat of being buried under hundreds of tonnes of collapsed building, he once more courted death.

Again, he knew he would not find the Reaper. A Barghest leapt at him, driving him to the floor. He suffered its tearing teeth and lashing tentacles, hoping maybe this would be the thing to dispatch him.

Eventually, he thrust Camulus up into the creature's stomach, and it screeched in outrage and pain. 'It is a gift,' he whispered as he extricated himself from the ropes of its dead body. Another failure, he thought.

Mark continued his steady slog upwards – ever upwards, towards Cú Roí. Maybe that creature could finally finish his hellish existence.

‘You want to die,’ said a melodic voice from behind him. He froze. He recognised that voice. Something began to burn within him, and all thoughts of suicide and melancholic self-pity vanished in an instant.

‘You,’ he said flatly. ‘I have been looking for you for a long time.’ He turned. The Maiden of Earth and Water stood before him. She was not as he remembered her; her eyes were still green and powerful, but her long fiery hair was matted and grimy. Her figure was still slim and toned, but now she was dressed in rags, and her face was filthy with soot and dirt.

When he had first seen her, Mark had thought her a peasant girl of passing attractiveness. Now, he saw the age behind the youthful appearance. It was in her eyes – knowledge beyond human understanding, the passing of far too much time, the self-loathing that comes with a desire for death. He knew it well, for he saw it in his own eyes every morning when he looked in the mirror. She smiled, her freckled cheeks crinkling slightly.

‘You have grown, Marcus Aquila Romila. I think you are more than the boy who desecrated the standing stones.’

‘I am less than that boy, for he had youth and passion and a lust for life. I have none of those things. You took them from me when you cursed me.’

‘I granted your wish, Marcus. I told you there would be a price.’

‘A price?’ he demanded angrily. ‘You took everything from me. Over, and over, and over again. It was a vicious torment. You did that. And you did it with a sweet smile, you sanctimonious bitch! I was a boy who pissed on a stone. I was arrogant and I was ignorant, but I did not deserve this living hell!’

‘Marcus, you understand nothing, even now.’

‘I understand enough. I understand that you will die here.’ She laughed with genuine humour and, he thought, affection. It was too much. He swung Camulus at her head.

The sword never reached its destination. It stopped of its own accord just before it touched her neck. Marcus strained for a few seconds, trying desperately to complete his revenge.

‘Poor Marcus,’ she said with sympathy. ‘Camulus cannot harm me, for I created it.’

Snarling, Marcus dropped the rainbow sword and reached over his shoulder. The black sword whispered from its sheath, the noise a sigh of pleasure amongst the crackling of the fires. ‘I had this forged especially for you. It has sent a thousand of your kind to hell.’

‘I know of it, just as I know of you, Marcus. You have forged a reputation amongst the Courts as a seeker of death. The black sword has become infamous. It is known as the Immortals’ Requiem, for it has sent many of my brothers and sisters to their doom; the sound it made as it cut the air was their only funeral song.’

Mark laughed without humour. ‘I like that,’ he said. ‘Now it will sing you into oblivion. You should have killed me all those years ago.’

‘And I have been encouraged to kill you many times since then. But your life is far too valuable for that, Marcus. You think I have been unkind to you, but ...’

‘Unkind? Unkind!’ Mark yelled the word in fury, spittle flecking his lips. ‘I’ve heard enough – now you die.’

The Immortals’ Requiem slashed towards the Maiden’s head, and this time there was no unseen force holding it back. It howled, the notch in the blade tearing the air. Mark felt his blood surge at its song. The blade craved the Elf’s blood, and Mark’s spirits soared as his revenge finally took form.

Then, something flashed in front of the Maiden, and the blade slammed into it. Mark stared along the length of the Immortals’ Requiem and saw that it was buried in a thick, muscular arm covered in tattoos. The arm’s owner was a hugely muscled man, tattooed from his neck down. Behind him, Mark saw a slim Elf with long blond hair, two gashes half healed along his filthy cheeks. Target One and Target Two. Target One raised his open palm towards Mark. ‘No, Camhlaidh,’ called the Maiden, and the Elf lowered his hand.

Screaming with the rage of being denied, Mark pulled the sword free and stabbed at Target Two. The tattooed man stumbled backwards, turning his body to protect the Maiden, and the Immortals’ Requiem slipped into his side. His tattoos appeared to writhe around its point as Mark thrust again, trying to bury

the sword as deep as he could.

Something tugged at the edges of his mind. He turned to face Target One. 'I am old beyond your imagining, boy,' he hissed at the Elf. 'I have spent millennia killing your kind – do you think I've not learned how to resist your Glamour?' The Elf went pale and took a step backwards. Mark allowed the hatred to well up in him. He dragged the Immortals' Requiem from the tattooed man and leapt towards the Elf.

Target One managed to point a shotgun at him and pull the trigger. He heard the boom and felt the load punch into his body at point-blank range, and he cartwheeled back into a flaming wall. Staggering back to his feet, he ran at the Elf again. When the blond creature's finger tightened on the trigger of the shotgun, Mark threw himself forwards and rolled beneath the whistling death.

Coming gracefully to his feet, he lashed out with the Immortals' Requiem and smashed the shotgun from the Elf's hands. Mark spun and brought the blade back around to decapitate Target One, who somehow managed to arch his back so the tip brushed his throat, opening the very top layer of skin. Mark twisted and stabbed the point of the blade down into the Elf's left thigh.

His yell of pain was sweet music to Mark's ears. Target One fell to his knees in front of him, and Mark raised the Immortals' Requiem to cut the Elf's head from his body. Somebody stepped between them.

Before the final blow came down, Mark saw who was in front of him and slowly the light of madness drained from him. 'Rowan?' he asked.

'I can't let you kill him, Mark. He's a good man. He's helping me find my sister.'

'But Tabitha's dead,' he said without thinking. The grief in Rowan's face triggered his own, and the strength went from him. The Immortals' Requiem fell from his fingers.

'Where? How?'

'My house ... Rowan, it was not an easy death.' Rowan stared at him, then just nodded and stepped back. The Maiden stood behind him, the tattooed man beside her.

'So, I fail in this too,' he said tiredly, the weight of Tabitha's death

overwhelming him. ‘This moment has driven me for two thousand years, and I cannot find the strength to kill you.’ He found himself on the floor, his legs bent underneath him. His head dropped to his chest. Quietly, amongst the fires, Mark began to cry.

Soft arms encircled him. He smelled the rich aroma of damp earth and a salt-spray ocean. Her arms were warm, and he fell back into them, burying his head in her bosom. She stroked his hair gently and hushed his sobs.

‘I have failed in everything,’ he said through his tears. ‘I hate you.’

‘I know. It is a heavy price, but one I willingly pay. I told you that there would be a price, didn’t I?’

‘It was too dear,’ Mark said. His eyes were closed, and he felt sleepy.

‘Marcus, you do not understand.’

‘How could I – you are inhuman, and the torture you inflict upon me is inhuman too.’

‘Do you believe that the power it requires to keep you from harm is something that I would use frivolously?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, uncaring. She held him close and he relaxed for what seemed like the first time in years.

‘The stone you defiled; did you ever bother to learn why it was so important to us?’

‘No,’ he said unashamedly.

‘It was the passing place of Grímnir Vafthrúdnir – the man who vanquished Cú Roí. Great power was expended there, enough to form a new Fairy-Ring. The day we met, I was there searching for inspiration. I see the futures – I explained that to you when you lectured me on the greatness of Rome. I see the futures, but they are hazy and difficult to interpret. I saw the return of Cú Roí and the weakness of my race. I was lost and alone, and I went to a place where I might find an answer.

‘Instead, I found a churlish boy defiling a place sacred to me. I was angry at first, and I thought to punish you. But when you wished to live forever – well, I found an answer.

‘I am an avatar of our magic. I was just an Elf. I am just an Elf, but when I

took the mantle of the Maiden of Earth and Water, I became much more. I became one with the magic. It has lived inside me for longer than you can imagine, but it was dying even back then, beneath the stone roads of Rome. I carried the Seed of magic, but to keep it within me would be to doom us all. I needed somewhere to hide the Seed – somewhere nobody would ever look. Somewhere that was inviolate. A true immortal.

‘You carry the Seed, Marcus, and the Seed keeps you alive. But I need it back now. You have done well, and I am sorry for the hurt I have caused you. It was necessary, though. I needed you here, in this place, at this time. Now I can face Cú Roí on equal terms. It is time to see Annaea again, Marcus.’

Mark sighed as he realised what she meant. Somewhere under his breastbone a warmth swelled. He felt the Maiden of Earth and Water’s fingers gently stroking his head, and the heat rose towards them, through his heart and up his neck and then into his brain. Soft whispers filled his mind, and he heard the magic speaking to him, wishing him well, giving him thanks. It was like being in a warm bath.

Rolling over, Mark gazed down at the face of Annaea sleeping beside him. He smiled down at her. She opened her eyes and smiled back. He bent towards her and their lips met ...

Camhlaidh

FOR A MOMENT, NOTHING HAPPENED. THE MAIDEN CONTINUED TO CARESS THE dead man’s head. An expression of intense grief contorted her beautiful features. Cam watched uncertainly, the pain in his leg a spiteful thing that throbbed mercilessly. Grímnir stepped past him and scooped up Camulus. The Maiden seemed to awaken from her reverie, and she sighed. Then, she carefully laid Mark’s body on the floor and stood up.

Cam staggered. ‘That bastard nearly took off my leg.’

‘Can you walk?’ Grímnir asked as he examined the bloody wound.

‘Just about, but God it hurts.’

‘He was a strong man. A warrior. I have never seen a human move so fast.’

‘He was a lunatic,’ Cam grumbled in the True Tongue.

‘The fate I dealt him was terrible,’ the Maiden said in English, ‘and he did a lot of terrible things because of it. But his love was powerful enough to see him through the ages. I think he was a good man, and I mourn his passing.’

‘He looks happy,’ Rowan said disbelievingly.

‘He is where he is supposed to be,’ the Maiden said. ‘He is at peace now. He is with your sister.’ Rowan turned away, his face blank. He walked to stand over the black sword.

‘The Seed was hidden within him?’ Cam asked as Grímnir tore a strip from the bottom of his shirt and used it to tightly bandage his wound.

‘Yes – it was necessary at the time. Some of the magic within him was used to resurrect his wife every fifty years, in this area. He had to remain near. To try to save her. It would not have done for him to be on the other side of the world and inaccessible when the Miracle Child returned. He suffered greatly, but his suffering served a purpose greater than any of us.’

‘What about the Satyr?’ Cam asked. ‘Did he carry a Seed as well?’

‘Yes, he did, though it was weakened by time and humanity’s taint,’ she said regretfully. ‘My husband never forgave himself for ignoring my warning – I think he wished to die.’

‘And where is the Satyr now? Where is his Seed?’ Cam asked suspiciously as his fingers tentatively explored the dressing around his thigh.

The Maiden ignored his question. Instead, she spoke to the group. ‘You must prepare yourselves for what is to come. We will face Cú Roí on the roof of this building, far above the Earth. We will be in his realm, where he is strong, and I am weak.’

‘Jesus,’ Rowan muttered. ‘Why are we even up here then? I mean look at Cam – he’s bleeding badly. He needs a doctor.’

‘The dragon would never have come to us on the ground. He sought this

place, where he has the advantage. He has no reason to face us. He is stronger than us. He could fly away and we would never find him until he was so powerful, it would be too late ... but up here? Stepping into his domain? The challenge will be enough to bring him to us. He will be angry and overconfident. We must take advantage.'

'How?' Cam asked.

'By swatting him. It is time to destroy the beast. Grímnir, are you ready to fulfil your destiny?' she asked in the True Tongue.

The Jötnar swung the rainbow sword, and his beard split into a ferocious smile. 'I am ready, my lady.'

Cam limped over to Rowan as the Maiden and Grímnir made their way back towards the stairwell. 'Are you okay?' he asked the marine as he examined his shotgun. It was ruined – the black sword had dented the barrel. With regret, he tossed the useless gun on the floor.

'Not really,' Rowan said without emotion. 'You know, dragons and stuff.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Yes, I know.' Rowan closed his eyes tight and for an instant he looked close to crying. 'She's dead.'

Cam put a consoling hand on Rowan's shoulder. 'We'll get the bastard,' he said.

'Do you think that'll be any use up there?' Rowan asked, nudging the Immortals' Requiem with his foot. 'I mean, I've still got that dead cop's gun, but I figure what the hell? Right?'

'It can't hurt.' He clutched his injured leg. 'If the worst comes to the worst, I suppose I could use it as a walking stick. You're going to have to help me get up there.'

Rowan picked up the sword, and Cam slung a tattooed arm around his shoulders. Together, they hobbled after their companions.

ROWAN

THE ROOF OF THE BEETHAM TOWER WAS DANGEROUS. DUSK RAPIDLY approached full night, and smoke billowed up from fires raging in the apartments below. A swirling dirty veil of soot and ash formed a column that stretched up into the sky, adding to the pall of smog from other burning buildings. The evening was infernally claustrophobic. Half of Manchester was ablaze, and the dark overcast reflected the malefic flickering of the flames. To Rowan, it felt as if the vaults of heaven were collapsing.

He stood with Cam near the access hatch that had brought them up onto the northeast corner of the roof. The Elf was pale, and his leg was soaked with blood. Rowan could only imagine the pain he was in, but Cam stayed upright, swaying slightly. Behind them reared a thirty-foot-tall glass and steel wall. Rowan had lived in Manchester all his life, and he had always thought that it was a windbreak – now he could see that it wasn't. Built of glass panels set sideways into the frame across the entire south edge of the building, it blocked nothing. The cold wind whipped at them as it blasted through. The wall hummed like a giant tuning fork.

Cam saw where he was looking. 'It's a lightning rod. I read that somewhere. They called it a "blade" in the article, but basically it's a lightning rod.'

Rowan nodded and looked back at the floor. The area was clad with large yellowy-beige tiles. They were more or less intact, but Rowan could see that they sagged and blistered in places, as if they were melting. All over, thin tendrils of smoke escaped from the cracks between their edges. Vents and grates and junction boxes were scattered across the roof. A huge crane was suspended sideways across the length of the building. The crane's arm was high enough to walk beneath, and the eastern end was connected to a window-cleaning carriage. Parts of the crane glowed red hot. Presumably, its infrastructure ran deep into the roof to anchor it, and this was conducting heat from the fires ravaging the lower

levels. The roof was searing and close, and the air was thick and choking.

Grímnir and the Maiden stood nearby. All four of them looked out over the city through thick shreds of smoke. To the north and east, Rowan could see vast tracts of buildings caught up in an unholy inferno which cast flickers of orange and red into the gloaming. The dragon was systematically levelling the city. To the west, the fires were few and sporadic. It hadn't gotten that far yet.

The beast hovered a little way to the northeast, sending great plumes of roiling flame into what Rowan guessed was Piccadilly Gardens. The dragon undulated like a banner, its body constantly moving. Its equally impressive wings beat slowly, impossibly keeping a creature the size of a blue whale in the air.

Lit up from below by the conflagration it had caused, the dragon looked like an enormous vermilion python with four powerful limbs hanging below it: a corded, red-scaled pennant that lashed at the air. Each limb was tipped by three dexterous-looking digits, each of those tipped with a foot of black talon. Its head was large and sleek, and curved horns sprouted from its head as if it were the devil himself.

Evidently, it had caught some people outside; it swooped down and out of sight, and when it reappeared, its sinuous neck rose as it swallowed something whole.

‘What can we do against that?’ Rowan asked Cam.

The Maiden answered. ‘We kill it.’

‘Look at this place,’ Rowan pointed to the roof. Parts were beginning to bubble, and a heat haze shimmered over some solar panelling towards the northwest corner. ‘The whole building’s going to collapse around us. We can’t stay up here. It’s suicide.’

‘We make our stand here,’ the Maiden insisted. ‘There is no more time. There is nowhere to go. Nowhere is safe. We stand now, or Cú Roí will take everything.’

‘I must be insane,’ Rowan said. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘We get its attention,’ Cam replied quietly.

Camhlaidh

CAM LOOKED AT THE MAIDEN AND GRÍMNIR. GRÍMNIR NODDED AT HIM, HIS FACE stony. The Maiden smiled encouragingly. A waist-high safety rail ran around the roof about three feet from the edge. He limped to it and stopped, unwilling to climb over it, as if it delineated some imaginary point of safety. Strange, he thought; some small part of him was still worried about safety. There was nothing safe in what he was about to do.

Cam raised his hand and for a moment he stared at the tattoo, lost in the intricate detail. It was so real. He felt woozy, weak, and tired. Cam didn't know if it was the loss of blood, shock, or just exhaustion, but he was struggling to concentrate. His injured leg spasmed and he leant on the rail to stop himself falling. He closed his eyes tight, fighting off dizziness and nausea. He took a deep breath and then looked back out over the city. Cam pointed the palm of his hand towards the dragon.

The eyes on his knuckles blinked. Then, a narrow line of blistering white fire shot from him. The flare covered the distance to Cú Roí in an instant, and then it was gone. Cam blinked away the afterglow that had burned across his retinas. He felt light-headed again and his hand slipped from the rail. He began to fall, but a strong arm caught him and held him upright. Cam smiled his thanks at Rowan.

'Are you okay?' the human asked. 'You look like shit. Maybe you should sit down for a bit.'

'I've got to get it to come over here,' Cam insisted. His legs gave way, and Rowan lowered him gently to the roof. The marine was still carrying the black sword, and it got tangled up between them.

'Look, just sit here,' Rowan said, putting the sword down. 'That leg's a mess.'

'No time,' Cam muttered. 'No time. Got to get it over here.'

‘What are you planning to do if it comes?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll think of something.’

‘Yeah right. I still think we should cut our losses ...’ Rowan went quiet. Cam looked around to see why. He followed Rowan’s gaze and shivered.

It had worked. The dragon was coming.

GRÍMNIR

IT FLEW THROUGH GREAT DRIFTING CLOUDS OF SMOKE TOWARDS THEM. IT WASN’T hurrying. Its red scales glittered like rubies, and its eyes were dead black with coruscating white cores. Grímnir watched his enemy approach through the dusk with anticipation. This was what he had given his life for. He did not like this new world with its strange smells and the stone that covered the Earth. He did not like the cold feeling he got when he tried to tap into the magic that no longer existed. He did not like the hordes of humans with their shining machines that he could not fathom, and their ugly language that he could not understand.

It was a freakish and inhospitable place and he felt lonely; out of his element. He was not stupid, and he knew only his burning need to destroy Cú Roí had kept him focussed. Without that, he was sure he would have gone mad.

There were some good things, he supposed. The Chain-Sword, though unwieldy, had been a joy to use; its noise and power had been breath-taking in the enclosed spaces of The Tower at Dawn, and the carnage it caused had been magnificent to behold. The beer had been nice too, and young Camhlaidh had proved himself to be worthy and steadfast, as had Dow. At the thought of his dead companion, sadness touched Grímnir. He had lost so many people. He was lost across the aeons. He had no lovers, no children, no real friends. Everybody and everything that he had ever cared about were gone. Dead. He had volunteered for this because he believed in the cause. He had dedicated himself

to this one purpose. To kill the dragon. His body was covered with a stark reminder of his commitment.

He thought of the Satyr, also dead now. Back when the plan was first conceived, the Maiden had agreed to bless the sword, while the Satyr had fused his magic into Grímnir's body. He had taken to the role of tattooist with a mischievous enthusiasm, insisting that Grímnir would be a work of art, not simply a block of ink. The tattoos of dragons had been an ironic gesture to his mission, the Satyr had stated with a grin, his eyes flaring in delight. Grímnir hadn't really cared, but the Maiden had laughed.

The joy had leaked from the big Ifrit as the years of the hunt dragged on unsuccessfully. He took to hiding in his apartments in The Tower at Dawn, becoming more and more reclusive as each season passed on Miðgarðr. When Grímnir found him again, he had barely recognised the Tattooist as the man he once knew. Even the immortals change, he thought sadly.

Camulus thrummed in his hand as if sensing his melancholy. They were one, he and the sword. Having it back completed him. He held Camulus up in front of his eyes. Colours danced along the rainbow blade. He read the runes, written there in the True Tongue so long ago.

I sacrifice immortality and my sacrifice shall live forever. He looked at the Maiden. 'The Miracle Child needs to be down here. I cannot kill it while it is flying,' he said.

She reached out and laid a slim hand on his shoulder. 'You always were the best of us, my friend. I wish you well in the next life.'

'This is not my world anymore. I am tired. Today is a good day to die.'

'I wish it could be avoided.'

'You more than anybody should understand how perilous wishes can be. Can you get it down?'

'Yes. Prepare yourself, Grímnir Vafthrúdnir, for you champion the world.'

Cú Roí hovered in front of them. Its mouth opened to reveal a cavernous maw filled with sabre-like teeth. It was smiling.

You have courage to come to me here, but your pet's small fires cannot harm me. I, who am forged from fire and air.

‘I have come to destroy you, Cú Roí. It is long past due,’ the Maiden replied.
You are weak. Your magic has almost gone from this land. Your pathetic attempts to harness my power have failed. Up here, so far away from the Earth, you are defenceless. Your death will be painful.

‘You misjudge me, dragon. I am not as weak as you believe.’

Show me. The dragon laughed. *Your bravado is worthless here.*

‘As you wish.’ The Maiden raised her hands to the dirty, ruined sky.

ROWAN

ABOVE THE MAIDEN, THE CLOUDS OF SMOKE OPENED LIKE AN IRIS, AND THE LAST light of the dying day bled through the hole. The ragged edges of smog and cloud around the calm purple disc of sky whipped up and began spiralling faster and faster. Rowan realised it was the eye of a storm in the moment before a hard rain like a rolling cliff of water came roaring over him and across the roof. Steam hissed off the superheated metal of the crane.

Huge, cold raindrops fell in a barrage so dense that it forced Rowan to his knees alongside Cam. It may as well have been a solid sheet. Water went everywhere – in his eyes and ears, and in his nose and mouth, causing him to choke and splutter.

Rowan tried to peer through the deluge, but it was difficult. Cam was curled up on the floor, grasping his injured leg. The dragon was a vague shape in the maelstrom – a shadow within a haze. Rowan thought that he could see its wings beating, but faster now, more urgently. It was finding it difficult to fly in the torrents of water.

A huge ball of fire spun from the shape and hissed through the rain a few feet above their heads. Rowan ducked instinctively, giving silent thanks that it had

missed the roof. He realised that if he couldn't see, then neither could the dragon.

'We've got to get out of here!' Rowan shouted at Cam over the hammering rain. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to talk. His words came out with a gurgle.

'I can't. My leg ...'

'We can't stay here. If the dragon doesn't get us, we'll bloody well drown!'

A twisting column of mud and debris lanced up past the edge of the building and crashed into the vague mass of the dragon before spilling back down. 'Holy shit!' Rowan gasped. 'Where the hell did that come from?' He turned to look at the centre of the roof. The Maiden stood with her hands above her head, untouched by the rain. Grímnir was several paces in front of her, staring out into the cascading waters. Another column rocketed past the northern edge of the building. The dragon twisted to avoid it and screeched angrily.

Rowan watched with awe. The Maiden conjured pillars – roughly the width of a fridge and made of tarmac, soil, and whatever else was caught in her magic – forty-seven storeys straight up. Once the skewers reached their peak, they cracked and crumbled, great swathes shearing away until the individual pillar lost its integrity and toppled out of sight to crash down onto the buildings far below.

Another spear of earth shot up. This one battered into the dragon, flipping it almost upside down. A belch of flame arced up into the sky as it fought to right itself. The monster held one wing out flat and flapped the other frenziedly as it writhed in the air.

In the seconds since the rain began, the dragon had come closer to the northern edge of the building. So close that Rowan considered picking up the Immortals' Requiem and sticking it up into the glittering iridescent belly. He knew it would be a futile gesture. Suicidal, even. Only one sword could kill the monster.

The dragon turned clumsily in the air, as if it were trying to fly away. As it righted itself, its tail hammered down, hitting the edge of the roof ten or eleven feet away from where Rowan knelt. Masonry crumbled, and the impact vibrated

through the building. The dragon tumbled again, unbalanced by the unexpected collision. Its wings beat and it flew a few feet out over the city, away from the roof. Before it could escape, another earth-spear, bigger this time, came tearing up from below. At its tip, like a clenched fist at the end of a long arm, was a black Lamborghini Reventón. Rowan caught a glimpse of a corpse in the driver's seat. The supercar hit the dragon under its jaw, delivering the most massive uppercut the marine had ever seen. The creature did a full somersault, its wings folding up as it tumbled over the roof from north to south. Another great stream of hellfire cut through the rain like a gigantic Catherine wheel, and scoured the roof behind Rowan before it blazed upwards and left a huge hole melted through the lightning rod.

The earth-spear broke and crumbled and fell forwards onto the top of the Beetham Tower. Rowan watched as the Lamborghini surfed an avalanche of debris that slumped onto the beige tiles. Mud and stone rumbled to the roof near the access hatch, narrowly missing him and Cam. The Lamborghini landed upside down on the crane, crushing it to the floor with a crunch and a screech. The dragon spun drunkenly over them, desperate now, wings flapping crazily as it fought to stay airborne. It failed.

GRÍMNIR

GRÍMNIR CLUTCHED CAMULUS AND WAITED. THE MAIDEN WAS BRINGING THE monster closer. Soon, he would be able to strike it down. He was not surprised by the furies that the Maiden had summoned. She had hidden her power away for this moment – to bind the creature long enough for him to cut its filthy head from its body.

The rain was a hammer, but he set his feet and absorbed it, unwilling to sacrifice his position even for an instant. He watched as the Maiden's magic

shepherded the dragon towards him. Soon.

One of the strange metal wagons the humans loved so much came hurtling up on a gigantic pillar of earth and crunched into Cú Roí's head. The dragon spun and flamed, and then slowly, ever so slowly, it careened towards the great transparent structure – that curious metallic fin – behind him. Grímnir ran towards it. 'Keep it down!' he called to the Maiden as he passed to her left. She nodded curtly, her face set with concentration.

It did not take him more than a few seconds to get to Cú Roí, but in that time the creature crashed into the centre of the fin headfirst. The whole thing shattered around the dragon. With a groan, it crumpled backwards until it was leaning drunkenly at forty-five degrees out over the streets far below it. Lengths of metal rope ripped out of the destruction with a chorus of metallic screeches and tangled around Cú Roí's wings and neck.

The monster thrashed desperately, trying to free itself. The broken fin trembled and wobbled. Between Cú Roí's flailing and the rain's constant assault, it was close to breaking away completely. Grímnir didn't hesitate. Still clutching Camulus in one hand, he began to climb up towards his enemy.

Camhlaidh

HIS LEG WAS AGONY. HE WAS DRENCHED. AND HE WAS SURE THE ROOF BENEATH him was starting to give way. The Lamborghini that had surreally smashed Cú Roí out of the air and demolished the crane blocked some of his view, but Cam could still see Grímnir. The Jötnar crawled up the toppled steel and glass construction towards Cú Roí.

The dragon was tangled up in the half-collapsed lightning rod. Its head had gone right through the hole it had burned there seconds before colliding into it. Its wings were caught in a snarl of twisted metal and loose cables, and its back

legs pushed and kicked frantically at the point where the structure joined the building as it tried to pull itself free. If Grímnir carried on the way he was, he would reach its head in moments. Then it would be over.

His heart was in his mouth. Even through the rain, Cam saw the dragon wrench its head free by half a foot. Steel cables tore loose from around its wings. The glass and steel wreck dropped another two feet and swayed alarmingly.

‘Can’t you do something?’ Rowan shouted at him.

‘Like what? The only trick I’ve got to hand is fire. I doubt it’d even notice.’

‘You can’t do anything?’

‘Well, I’m open to suggestions,’ Cam snapped irritably.

‘Christ, Cam – it’s getting loose. What have you got to lose?’

‘Oh, what the hell,’ he said. He raised his hand, pointed it at the dragon, and let loose a blazing stream that cut across its belly. Cú Roí didn’t seem to notice. Why should it? It was a fucking dragon. A dragon! How on Miðgarðr had he ended up here, bleeding to death on top of a burning fifty-storey building? How?

Grímnir was struggling over a great mess of steel and glass. Cú Roí was pulling itself backwards out of the tangle that held it. ‘I told you! I can’t do anything!’ Cam shouted at Rowan. The marine didn’t answer. ‘Are you listening to me?’

‘Oh shit,’ Rowan said.

‘What?’ Cam demanded. ‘What?’ Rowan wobbled to his feet, bent into the storm, and ran towards the centre of the roof. Cam saw him pull the gun from his jacket.

GRÍMNIR

GRÍMNIR WAS SO CLOSE. IF IT WEREN’T FOR THE MAGIC OF HIS TATTOOS, HE would have been half-flayed. He clutched Camulus, and squirmed and crawled

and dragged himself up and across glass and sharp metal, ignoring the pain just as he ignored the fear of failure. Frustration crashed around him, but he refused to give up. The beast was nearly free.

The Maiden had brought it down to the roof just as he had asked. It must not escape. It pulled its head back a few more inches out of the snarl of metal ropes that had muzzled it. With a grinding squeal, the fin jerked again and dropped another few feet. It was practically horizontal now. Grímnir pushed himself to his feet. The cloudburst stopped. The rain melted away as if it had never been.

With one final heave, Cú Roí pulled its massive wedge-shaped head free and roared triumphantly into the damp air. Failure. Disappointment and anger coursed through Grímnir. He looked over to the Maiden, desperately. Was there nothing more she could do?

She was down. A golden Therian squatted over her. The human soldier was running towards them. Grímnir could not help. He turned back to Cú Roí; it was staring at him malignantly, slowly working its wings free.

You fail again. She was much more powerful than I anticipated. She will not surprise me again, even if she lives. You squandered your chance, zealot. The world is mine.

Titanic laughter slammed through Grímnir's head. The monster was right. He could not die, but if it burned him to a cinder, it would escape before he healed. The dragon clung to the wreckage like a malignant bat and turned its head towards him. Its mouth opened and hellfire bubbled up at the back of its dark throat. Grímnir threw himself to one side. Fire washed past him and hit the centre of the roof near the metal wagon. Even damp with the rain, the surface couldn't stand up to that maelstrom; it began to burn.

Cú Roí's head swivelled on its ophidian neck away from Grímnir. The dragon looked down at its trapped right wing and another billowing wave of fire rolled over it, melting the cable that held it. The fire kept going and hit the western side of the roof and it set on fire. The roof below the solar panels surrendered to the heat and collapsed. Flames, finally liberated from the inferno below, punched up through the hole to claw at the falling sky.

The dragon turned his attention to its left wing. Grímnir charged up as fast as

he could, ignoring the perilous swaying of the fin. Cú Roí sent another blast at him, and Grímnir rolled to his side. The whole structure juddered and dropped, and Grímnir slid through a wide hole torn in it when it first collapsed. He flailed around desperately as he fell, grabbing at anything he could.

A piece of shattered glass ripped his right arm open from elbow to wrist, and then tore away the heel of his hand and his little finger. He kept his remaining fingers clenched tightly around Camulus. His left hand caught hold of a steel rod. He came to a jarring halt, and something in his left shoulder popped. Grímnir hung beneath the fin. His feet dangled five hundred feet above a small shadowy yard nestled between this tall building and a smaller annexe that stuck out from the back of it at ground level. Even in the twilight, it seemed like he could see the entire world from up here. It looked gloomy and dirty. He felt the strange discomfort of his finger growing back. Then he heaved Camulus up above his head and hooked his right forearm over some dangling wreckage.

He still had the sword. There was still hope, but he was trapped. If he dragged himself back up, Cú Roí would incinerate him. The fin was swaying and vibrating hazardously. Pops and cracks and the screeching of tormented metal filled his ears. The creature was nearly free, but there was still some time. He looked at the hard ground so very far below. There was one last chance. His decision made, Grímnir began using his bodyweight to jerk the broken framework down as fast and as hard as he could.

ROWAN

A BLUR OF YELLOW FUR HAD HIT THE MAIDEN FROM BEHIND. THE THING WAS BIG – bigger than a man at any rate – standing seven feet tall with huge muscled limbs and a thick, powerful torso. Rowan charged towards it with no clue how

he could kill it.

It stood upright like a man, but its shoulders hunched in such a way that it looked like it would be as comfortable on all fours. It was vaguely feline, with a wedge-shaped head split by a massive snout that was rimmed with nasty-looking teeth. Its fur was spotted like a leopard's, and its fingers were long and powerful with claws jutting from them.

The thing dove on the Maiden and tried to bite her face. Rowan acted instinctively. He pointed the handgun at it and emptied the magazine. Tufts of golden fur shredded away from its body in bloody clumps. The creature turned to face him. Rowan suddenly realised where he had seen it before.

It was the woman from the underground train station: the one who had changed into this thing. It looked different without the creepy green glow of the night vision goggles to distort it.

He stopped running. The were-leopard stared at him balefully, its slit yellow eyes filled with blind hate. Rowan began to edge towards the access hatch. It watched him, its claws clenching. The Maiden lay at its feet, apparently dazed by the juggernaut of thick muscle that had driven her there. As far as he could tell, she was unconscious. He kept circling slowly to his left. The dragon began breathing fire, and in a few moments the far side of the roof was an inferno.

Over the were-leopard's shoulder, Rowan could see Grímnir. He stood precariously, halfway along what had once been the big glass slab that had topped the Beetham Tower. Now it was broken and bent. Most of the glass had shattered, and the steel pylons at its core that had kept it upright were twisted sideways. The whole structure stuck out past the edge of the roof and hung over the streets below at a five- or ten-degree angle. Cables and tangled metal jutted out in a thick razor jumble, and the dragon's left wing was snared in that web of debris.

Rowan didn't know what to do. He hesitated, and the dragon sent a lance of flame towards the big man. Grímnir vanished. 'No!' Rowan shouted helplessly. The were-leopard rumbled something close to a laugh and took a step towards him.

A squeal came from the lightning rod and it jerked down and then bounced

back up again. Another squeal, like fingernails on a chalkboard, and the wreckage drooped farther towards the ground.

Once, twice, three times in quick succession the glass and steel ruin bounced up and down. The dragon began writhing urgently and screeched in anger. The were-leopard turned at the sound of its Master's voice and took a tentative step towards the dragon. On the fourth jerk, there was a low groan from the structure. On the fifth, something scraped and snapped with a tortured wail. On the sixth, the whole thing suddenly came loose from the side of the building and disappeared. The dragon screeched again as it was dragged down to the unforgiving ground.

The were-leopard kept its back to Rowan, staring at the empty space where the dragon had been. He could have sneaked off, but he didn't want to leave the Maiden alone and vulnerable. He quickly swapped out the clip and fired another barrage at the were-leopard. Its head jerked forwards with each bullet. Rowan stopped with three bullets left. They were his last. He had no other weapon – even the Immortals' Requiem was out of reach next to Cam. He didn't know why he kept the ammunition. Bullets didn't have much effect on these things; it just made them angry. But having them made him feel more secure. God help him, he needed all the security he could find.

He turned and sprinted for the access hatch. An angry roar told him the were-leopard was chasing him.

GRÍMNIR

CONSCIOUSNESS BROUGHT WITH IT A GREAT WEARINESS. GRÍMNIR'S BODY WAS still healing. It felt like most of his bones were shattered. They squirmed and crawled together, and it hurt with a raw, insidious pain that burrowed through to the core of his being. He waited until the worst was over. It took everything not

to scream.

He opened his eyes and stared up at the dark, tumultuous sky. Slowly, he tested his limbs. Everything was slightly off. He felt crumpled, as if his insides were misshapen and his bones were buckled. Everything was serviceable except for his right shoulder and his left arm. They throbbed, too damaged to repair themselves without a little help. Large joints and hinges had always been complicated. If they healed wrong, they could deform and had to be reset. Sometimes they needed to be forced back into place, like a dislocation.

Dislocation. That was a good word. It summed up how he felt. Dislocated. Wrenched out of place. Cumbersome and painful. He was so tired. Tired of it all. A fat coil of smoke drifted overhead. He wanted to close his eyes. He wanted to sleep. He wanted it to end.

The ground was wet. Water had soaked through his clothes and into every fold of skin. There was noise – lots of noise: the discordant scream of the alarms the metal wagons sounded when they were damaged, and the occasional muffled boom as something exploded. He could hear a soft wind and the faint crackling of fire. He could hear breathing: loud, rumbling, panting breathing, too loud to be human.

He still had his quest. One last labour. One last monster to slay. With a grunt, he tried to sit up. Something was pinning him. He turned his head to the right. A spike of sheared-off steel had impaled him. He looked to his left. His arm was unnaturally bent. He tried to move it and grunted at the pain. Ignoring the discomfort, he began to thrash his left shoulder. It felt like his arm was stuffed full of hundreds of pebbles that ground against each other with every movement. On his fifth attempt, his left arm flopped flaccidly onto his stomach. He reached awkwardly with his right hand and felt along the length of his broken arm. He made a quick assessment. Pinned as he was, he did not have the leverage to reset the arm.

The shaft of metal was lodged in his clavicle. Between that, the suction, and his position, it would be impossible to pull himself off it. He stared up at the smoke-tarnished sky and took a deep breath. Then he wrenched himself sideways. The metal pulled at his collarbone, sending daggers of agony shooting

through him. He gritted his teeth and did it again.

He felt the bone trapping the spike snap. Again. The thick muscle of his shoulder tore. Again. Gouts of blood pulsed from the widening wound. Grímnir moaned but kept at it. Slowly, inch by inch, he tore his body from the metal. Finally, the skin of his shoulder parted, and he rolled away. Automatically, he staggered to his feet and took a half-step, fleeing the thing that had caused him so much pain. His legs felt like liquid, and he collapsed to his knees. For a second his mind was empty, and he stared at nothing. The dragons on his skin writhed to cover the obscene gash and knit his flesh back together.

He shook his head to clear it, took hold of his left elbow, and wrenched it into place. Once the elbow was back in its socket, he moved on. The humerus had fractured obliquely, and the bottom half of the bone had lanced up towards his shoulder, overlapping the upper half. He pulled the arm down, hard. The bone grated into place, and he began pushing and pulling until the two ends met and fused back together. The arm felt wrong, somehow crooked. The humerus had not healed straight, but it was the best he could do. The monstrous breathing was becoming shallow and rapid.

The pain was fading, but the memory of the pain stayed with him. It would haunt him – so many things haunted him. He hung his head. There was a puddle below him. The water was stained with his blood. In the half-light, his red-tinged reflection looked demonic. His eyes were black holes, his skin swam and shimmered, and his beard was wild and knotted.

Grímnir looked up. He was kneeling on the hard tarmac of a small triangular car park, surrounded by shattered glass and the twisted steel shell of the fin he had brought down from the top of the building. The wreckage was propped up at a steep angle, one end on the roof of an annexe that was attached to the taller building, the other crumpled up on the floor around him. The annexe was three storeys high and black. The window of a corner office had shattered. A white shirt that had been hung up just inside flapped and fluttered, a frightened ghost in a greying world that caught at the corner of the eye.

Cú Roí's head hung upside down over the side of the roof, snared by steel cables and pinned by girders. It was on its back. Its eyes were closed, and its

throat was bared. It looked unconscious. Vulnerable. The wreckage that had fallen with them formed an almost vertical ladder up the side of the black annexe. Grímnir's heart leapt. He could finish it now. He could kill the beast. The Jötnar surged to his feet and took a step towards the insensible reptile. He stumbled. His left leg was an inch shorter than his right. His whole body felt wrong, and his gait was clumsy. It didn't matter: he had to go on. He took another limping step and stopped.

Where was Camulus? How could he have lost the sword again? He looked around, but he couldn't see it amongst the wreckage. Grímnir raised his face to the blackened sky and let out a roar of frustrated rage. The dragon's eyes snapped open, and it roared back at him.

ROWAN

WHEN ROWAN AND HIS SMALL PARTY HAD FIRST COME INTO THE PENTHOUSE apartment, they found it devastated. Fires raged through what might once have been a small copse of trees, as fantastical as that sounded at the top of a building like this. The windows behind were shattered, which was a small blessing because the smoke got sucked out, making the atmosphere survivable, if little else.

The windows on the opposite side of the building were broken too, but by some small miracle, the fire had not yet spread that far. There was a flight of stairs leading from one of the apartment's floors to the other. Just like a house, the lower floor comprised the living area and the upper floor hosted the bedrooms. During whatever catastrophic battle that occurred before they arrived, something had demolished a fair chunk of the wall at the top of the stairs on the upper floor. There was a service corridor through the hole. The access hatch onto

the roof was at the end of the corridor. Cam had melted the locking mechanism to get it open.

Now Rowan was back. He fell through the hatch and landed awkwardly. Recovering his balance and saying a silent prayer of thanks that he hadn't snapped an ankle, he ran towards the hole in the wall. Hearing a thump behind him, Rowan glanced over his shoulder as he reached the gap. The were-leopard crouched beneath the hatch, its eyes focussed on him malevolently. Its jaw hung open and a huge purple tongue lolled out, dripping saliva.

Rowan slipped through the gap into the apartment and charged down the stairs. The white walls to either side were stained with soot. Something flashed above his head, and the huge Therian landed at the bottom of the stairs. He turned and ran back upstairs. He heard a gurgling growl. The thing was laughing at him.

As he reached the top a clawed hand snagged his left foot and he tumbled to the floor. He turned onto his side and drove his right foot back into a razor-toothed snout. The thing recoiled with a wet snuffle, and Rowan dragged himself free.

He scrambled to his feet desperately and, not wanting to get trapped in the service corridor, ignored the hole and instead turned right along the landing. The rail to his right was waist high. The thing gurgled another growl behind him. It was playing with him. He turned and leapt over the rail, falling with a gasp, seven feet to the designer tiles. His stomach lodged briefly beneath his sternum, then he landed, tucked and rolled. The floor was smooth and slippery, and he slid a few feet and nearly fell through the broken window. He pushed himself away, got up, and turned. He faced the charred and burned-out remains of a kitchen and dining area. The table and chairs were little more than smoking, splintered kindling on the floor. The walls were on fire. The heat reached out for him, and he narrowed his eyes against it. There was nowhere else to go.

Holding his breath, he darted through the conflagration and found himself vaulting up a small wall and into a shallow, empty pool. Around him, well-spaced trees burned. Ahead of him was another shattered window. Cold wind and smoke blew around him. There was nowhere to hide. 'Open-plan bollocks,'

he muttered to himself.

Another growl. He turned. The massive Therian stood at the edge of the pool. He backed slowly towards the broken window. 'Who are you?' The question was guttural and slurred, but undeniably feminine.

Rowan answered to buy some time. 'My name is Rowan. I was looking for my sister, Tabitha.' He kept moving backwards. The were-leopard matched him step for step. He saw the precision of its movements and knew that it was stalking him: toying with him.

'Tabitha? You mean Sam's wife?' It laughed.

'You know her?' Rowan asked.

'I know of her. The Master took her, raped her, forced his seed into her. The Master's progeny grows quick and wild – you have seen them: the Barghest. Big and pink and hungry? Covered in tentacles? She begged him to spare her, but the Master used her and discarded her, nothing but a vessel for his spawn.' What she said was all the more horrifying because they issued from that guttural and malformed palate.

'She will be dead by now, ripped open by her child's birth. Have you seen that movie, *Alien*? Like that. Not a pleasant way to go, but merciful compared to what I have in store for you.' Her rough purple tongue ran across her fangs. Trails of thick saliva dripped to the floor.

Rowan barely noticed. Mark had said Tabitha's death was not easy, but this? In his heart of hearts, he knew it was true. She had been in the hands of the monsters for too long. He fought off an overwhelming need to scream, knowing that losing it now would only make him more vulnerable. There would be time to grieve if he survived, but for now ...

The were-leopard exploited his distraction. It threw itself at him. He instinctively ducked and sidestepped out of its way. Its feet slipped on the smooth base of the empty pool as it flew towards him. It tried to turn to follow him, but it couldn't stop sliding, and it skidded past him. It tumbled towards the broken window and the void beyond. Lethely it twisted and its claws flashed out, managing to catch one edge of the window. It had too much momentum; it slid inexorably out and fell to dangle over the burning city.

Carefully, Rowan approached the creature and stared down at it. A thick plume of smoke billowed out of one of the lower apartments so that the thing looked like it was hanging over black fog by the tips of its fingers. It morphed as he watched, and suddenly there was a beautiful young woman staring pleadingly up into his eyes.

‘Please, don’t let me fall,’ she begged. ‘I can’t help what I have become – I didn’t ask for it. I don’t deserve to die. Please help me. Maybe we can find a cure together?’

‘A cure?’

‘Yes,’ she said desperately. ‘My name is Annalise. I’m a victim as well, just like your sister. Please, I don’t want to die. I can help you. We can find a cure ...’

‘I’ve already discovered a cure,’ Rowan interrupted coldly. ‘It’s the same cure my sister found.’ He stamped on her fingers until she finally let go. He watched impassively as she was swallowed in the bank of darkness and smoke.

GRÍMNIR

THEY STARED AT EACH OTHER ACROSS THE SHORT DISTANCE. THE DRAGON’S EYES were familiar. Black as pitch with diamonds glittering hypnotically at their centres. It did not blink. They stood like that, frozen, for what seemed an age.

Something came out of the sky. A pale blur hit the edge of the roof of the annexe where the dragon lay with enough force to break off a large piece of masonry. The pale thing bounced towards him. It spun past him, broken and twisted. Grímnir saw that it was a woman. Her limbs were shattered, undulating like flags in a strong breeze. Her head was deformed, and a red trail spilled from her shattered brainpan in a bloody arc. Even in the semi-darkness, he saw that the blood turned to vermilion ash as it was whipped away in the breeze.

The woman landed on her back not far from Grímnir. She slid down a pile of wreckage, dislodging it and pushing it along in a small tinkling, grinding avalanche. Her right arm lolled flaccid and filleted to the ground, and the back of her hand came to rest on a sigil-branded hilt, revealed by the shifting rubble.

Grímnir looked at the dragon. It had seen the sword too. Its tongue slipped out and licked around its scaled mouth. Grímnir stumbled for the sword as the dragon thrashed, fighting against its bonds. He got to the sword, ignoring the woman, and scooped it up. He felt a familiar warmth as he held the weapon. The runes sparkled, despite the gloom pressed down upon them by the apocalyptic sky.

Grímnir turned to face his enemy. The dragon was struggling to free itself, but it was wrapped up in the wreckage on its back. Grímnir took a step towards it, and it redoubled its efforts.

Its head jerked from side to side on a neck as thick as two men. Its wings curled up past its belly and legs, straining upwards, dark silhouettes against a darker sky. Its teeth snapped at cables and warped steel. Grímnir took another step. A cable snapped with a hiss and a whine. One wing pushed a girder away to the side. Yet another step. Grímnir smiled. Despite its efforts, the thing was trapped. It could not escape.

It opened its mouth wide and twisted its head to face him. Something red and wild flickered deep at the back of its throat. Grímnir tried to dodge out of the way, but his mismatched legs betrayed him, and he slipped jarringly to one knee.

Grímnir had often heard Camhlaidh use a human word in times of stress. The big man had no idea what it meant, but it was short and full of brutal expression. It seemed like an appropriate time to try it out.

‘Fuck,’ Grímnir said as a searing bar of blue and white flame jetted from the dragon’s maw, engulfing him.

ROWAN

SOMEWHERE, A CHILD WAS CRYING. ROWAN STOPPED AT THE BOTTOM OF THE stairs and listened. A high-pitched, choking wail came from somewhere above him. It was the faint and desperate hunger cry of an infant.

How a baby could have survived was beyond Rowan. It was a miracle. ‘Don’t worry,’ he shouted. ‘Don’t worry, I’m coming!’ The crying stopped. ‘No, no – keep making a noise.’ He ran up the stairs as he shouted and turned right towards the bedrooms.

After a moment, the crying started again. There. Farther along. The baby was in one of the bedrooms. He followed the sound, all the time shouting that he was coming to save the child, knowing it could not understand him, but not caring one iota. He charged into the bedroom, looking frantically around. If he could save the child ... If he could just save someone ...

The noise stopped when the door slammed back into the wall. The room was exquisite and untouched by fire or smoke so far. A huge room in white. Amazingly, a bedside lamp was on. There was a king-sized bed next to the door. It backed up against a wooden bookshelf with urns and vases on top of it. Another floor to ceiling window formed the wall opposite the door, and it was shrouded in a sheer and gauzy white curtain. Pictures and sideboards ... Rowan’s eyes scanned the room quickly. There was no child.

‘Come on,’ he shouted desperately. ‘Tell me where you are.’ There was a brief cough from a huge wardrobe opposite the foot of the bed, on the other side of the room from where Rowan stood. Of course. If he had been desperate to quickly hide a child, he supposed he would have done the same.

Rowan stepped forwards and slipped on the tiled floor. Recovering his balance, he looked down. There was a smear of pink-tinged slime beneath him. The monsters had been here. The baby must be blessed to have escaped.

He stepped quickly past the bed and pulled the wardrobe door open. He

choked off a soothing coo and ducked a stabbing tentacle. ‘Jesus fuck!’ he shouted as he stumbled backwards. The barb at the end of the Barghest’s limb passed so close in front of his eyes, he fancied he could see the individual serrations along its glistening edge.

Rowan fell on his arse. His hands went behind him and he scabbled backwards, pushing with his feet as he went. Panting, he came up against the end of the bed. Adrenaline surged through him and he felt light-headed.

The Barghest didn’t follow. It began to cry again. As his heart pounded down to a more normal rate, he started to notice details. The monster was badly hurt. It only had a bunch of tentacles left to it; the rest had been sheared away. The stumps quivered. Its thick barrel of a body lay on its side. Halfway along its length there was a big, sucking wound. The Barghest had made a nest of ripped-up clothes, and its round mouth chewed aimlessly at nothing. It began to cry again, those few remaining appendages weaving around it in a protective web.

Rowan climbed to his feet. He was about to turn and leave the thing to its fate when he saw something behind it, at the back of the deep wardrobe. Two boxy, bright red packages.

He stepped towards them without thinking. He needed them. The Barghest went quiet again, and its tentacles stopped weaving and came upright, facing him like hunting racer snakes.

Rowan stopped short. He pointed the gun at it but didn’t shoot. It would be useless. ‘And how am I going to finish you off, you skittery little bastard?’ he asked gently. The Barghest started crying again.

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CAM LAY ON THE FLOOR AND STARED UP INTO THE SKY. IT WAS BLACK AND broken. He thought it must be the smoke from the city, but to his fading sight,

everything was blurred. His leg had stopped hurting; instead, he felt a terrible cold creeping over his body.

I'm going to die, he thought to himself. I've lost too much blood. A human would have died three times over by now. Death. The thought should have been terrifying, but he found it strangely peaceful. Maybe this was how Mark Jones had felt when the Maiden finally let him rest. Maybe he would see his father. He hoped so. It was a shame that Manchester was burning. He did love the city, even with all its faults.

The sky began to swirl. It fell towards him, closing down his peripheral vision until there was nothing but a pinpoint of smoke, and then even that was consumed in darkness.

GRÍMNIR

EVEN INCINERATION COULDN'T KILL HIM. IT WAS INCONVENIENT, THOUGH. A third party standing nearby would have seen the white-hot flame turn the Jötnar from flesh and blood into a greasy shadow. Camulus dropped to the ground with a clang, undamaged. Flecks of ash swirled in the convection currents formed by that furnace heat.

They didn't drift away on the wind. Instead, they came back together in organic clumps. Slowly at first, then quicker and quicker, new sinew and tattooed flesh crawled over the charred remnants. Questing matter found and bonded with its neighbours, and a puddle of meat became Grímnir.

When his vocal cords grew back, he screamed. He had been gone – his brain flashed instantaneously to nothing. With the return of consciousness came a feeling of massive displacement, the like of which he had not felt since he awakened a few days ago. Like before, he shrugged the feeling off and climbed to his feet. Why had the monster bothered? It knew it couldn't kill him. So why

waste its energy? If anything, it had done him a service because he was whole again – he had been unmade and regenerated anew. His bones were straight and true. He felt strong and limber.

Camulus lay on the ground. Grímnir picked it up. It was hot. He was naked, but he didn't care. His only thought was for the dragon. He turned to look for it. It was gone. Where? How? He scanned the annexe roof and saw something moving.

One of the creature's wings was jerking spasmodically. It was shrinking, disappearing beneath the broken metallic fin. 'No,' Grímnir shouted. 'You cannot escape me!' In the moments Grímnir had taken to regenerate, the dragon had seized its opportunity. Cú Roí had been wrapped in cables and pinned under collapsed masonry. In his dragon form, he had been caught like a fish in a net. Cú Roí was changing back into his humanoid form to slither out of the trap.

Gripping Camulus with one hand, Grímnir began climbing the rubble towards the roof of the annexe. It was awkward, slow going and he knew he was taking too long. Cú Roí would not be fooled again. If he escaped now, the world would burn.

ROWAN

THE EYELESS TRUNK THAT ROWAN ASSUMED WAS THE THING'S HEAD POINTED straight at him. The slack oval mouth opened wide. Ring after ring of tiny teeth marched backwards down its wide, slowly pulsating throat. It was hissing at him. The last thing he wanted was to get close to it: it would kill him without hesitation. It had thirteen tentacles left. He had counted them. They weaved back and forth defensively.

It was a fascinating creature. A truly awful biological weapon but fascinating

all the same. This one was badly injured but still alive. It wasn't regenerating, not like Sam had. It wasn't fading away, either. Rowan had no doubt it would starve before it died of anything else. If it could starve. Or it would burn.

He had only been in the bedroom for a minute, but smoke was beginning to come through the door. The marine could hear fire nearby. It was spreading quickly now – it had a hold on the apartment and no doubt, the building. If he didn't act quickly, he'd suffocate and his body would be cremated here, his ashes mixed with those of the monster in the wardrobe. He did not relish the thought of that.

He couldn't leave though. There would be no way down through the building now. The smoke would get him if the flames didn't. They were trapped. Unless he could get those two red boxes discarded and forgotten behind the Barghest. They were personal rescue devices. They were, in effect, civilianised rappelling equipment: emergency evacuation equipment for high rise buildings. Rowan had come across them a few months ago when he was researching abseiling equipment. They were marketed as a must-have for anybody living or working in a tall building post-9/11. An expensive gimmick, as far as he had been concerned.

His heart had leapt when he had seen them in the wardrobe. Rowan could only imagine how they had ended up here. Probably a bad taste housewarming gift. He doubted they had been bought seriously – buildings like this were pretty much fireproof. They were compartmentalised, and the best thing to do was wait until the fire brigade turned up and put it out. Tall buildings would not collapse, and if they were going to, then you were screwed anyway.

Except, nobody had designed for a fire-breathing dragon. Or a lack of emergency services. He doubted there was a building in the world that could weather this sort of storm. A thick plume of smoke billowed through the door. A high-pitched crash indicated a superheated ornament had fractured somewhere below. It was getting warmer, too. Rowan eyed the personal rescue devices through the Barghest's snaking limbs. They were his only chance to get out.

The Barghest started crying again. It sounded just like a baby. In a warped way, Rowan supposed it was. One of those had come out of Tabby. He shut his

eyes tight and tried to push the thought away. No time for grief. He had to kill it. He pointed the gun at it but again he didn't fire. It'd just piss it off. He had to do something.

Smoke caught at the back of his throat and he coughed. A second later, the Barghest went wild. Rowan stared as it began to thrash around frantically in its nest. Its crying became shriller and more urgent. Its tentacles thudded against the sides of the wardrobe.

The smoke. It had smelled the smoke. It knew that the fire was coming, and it was scared. Its tentacles wrapped together into a single thick limb with barbs sprouting from the end. It lashed out towards Rowan. He stumbled backwards and fell onto the bed.

It wasn't coming for him though. It was trying to escape. The Barghest pulled itself forwards a few inches and then the tentacle whipped back, and then forwards again, like a cast fishing line. Again, the Barghest dragged itself forwards a couple of inches.

Too slow. It was going too slowly. Rowan needed it out of the way now. There was not enough room to dodge around it. There was a whomp and a crash from outside. Smoke began to flood into the room through the open door, a black roiling flow that hugged the ceiling. Rowan rolled onto his side and shot the window. It exploded outwards, and air whipped into the bedroom and carried some of the smoke away. He hoped it would buy some time.

The Barghest advanced another inch towards the door. The bed and duvet were so luxuriously soft that Rowan struggled to sit up. It gave him an idea. He scrambled off the bed and ducked out of the bedroom. Fire had taken the landing. Part of the floor had caved in. He coughed and choked, raising a useless hand to cover his mouth. He could barely see a thing, and he could feel the heat on his face. He could see the hole in the wall that led back to the roof.

He still had time, but not much. Rowan ran back to the door and peered inside. The Barghest was next to the bed. Rowan took a calming breath, which turned into a debilitating cough, and then he spun into the room with the gun in his right hand. He fired his last two bullets straight down the gullet of the creeping monster. It tried to retreat, its tentacles waving around frantically.

He threw the empty gun after it, grabbed the edge of the thick eiderdown duvet and pulled it off the bed and over the Barghest. Then he pulled the mattress onto it for good measure.

Rowan jumped on the bed and then ran past the thing on the floor. He reached into the wardrobe and grabbed the personal rescue devices, one in each hand. They were much heavier than he had expected. The duvet and mattress were bucking wildly. The Barghest was still tangled up and pinned, but its tentacles had torn through the thick material and were slamming against the walls and floor wildly. One came perilously close to Rowan as he climbed back onto the bed and shuffled past it.

The marine left the bedroom and shambled back to the hole in the wall. When he reached it, he looked back over his shoulder. The apartment was consumed in flames. The stairs down to the lower level had collapsed. Pools of fire burned everywhere, rapidly spreading towards each other. There would be no escape that way.

Something moved in the fire. Some things. As Rowan watched, a Barghest dodged out of the flames and onto a rare patch of safe tiles near an unbroken window. It saw him. Rowan knew it had seen him, even though it didn't have any eyes. This one was not injured. It was whole.

It roared. There was an answering roar from somewhere else in the apartment. A second Barghest joined the first. Then a third and a fourth. 'You're having a laugh,' Rowan said. 'You have to be fucking kidding me!' Whichever deity he was admonishing didn't answer.

He turned and ran into the hole. He doubted the lack of stairs or even the fire would slow the creatures down for long.

GRÍMNIR

ONCE AGAIN, IT COMES DOWN TO THIS. TO THE TWO OF US.

‘This time you have no tricks. No sacrifices. No escape. Get out of my head.’

Cú Roí laughed. ‘As you wish,’ he said in the True Tongue. The roof of the black annexe was a wasteland of twisted steel and broken glass. Cú Roí stood naked in the middle of the destruction. Grímnir faced him, resting his weight on Camulus, which he held point down on the roof.

‘It is over. There is nowhere to run.’

‘You have said that before.’ Silence stretched out between them. Cú Roí broke it. ‘Why do you hunt me?’

‘It is my purpose.’

‘It has not always been so. Why do you hunt me?’

‘To remove your evil from the world.’

‘Evil? What evil? I am designed to conquer. I was born to rule. Just as you are a god to these humans, so, too, am I a god to you. If the people of The Towers are insignificant to me, then these wretches are little more than dust beneath my feet. Clay to mould as I see fit. I am not evil. I simply am.’

‘You cause death and destruction wherever you go ...’

‘And that is my right. My right by strength. I will reshape this world in my image, and in a hundred years, none of my people will think that I am evil. The chosen will relish the immortality and strength I grant them. The cattle will not even remember that they once had free will. They will be domesticated and bred for the tables of my children. That is not evil. That is simply progress.’

‘I will stop you.’

‘Maybe. Maybe. But what right do you have to do that?’

‘The right of strength.’

Cú Roí smiled. ‘We are not so different, are we? I ask again, why do you hunt me?’

‘Enough of this,’ Grímnir said hefting Camulus up into a two-handed grip. ‘You have nothing left, Cú Roí. Leach is not hiding in the shadows with some Barghest to distract me. You have nowhere to run. It ends here.’

‘You have no answer, do you? You have no moral authority here, zealot. You’re just another fanatic let off his leash. No, I don’t have Leach by my side.

An immortal monster came out of nowhere and killed him. Mark Jones, it called itself. A monster created by your precious Maiden. She made that twisted abomination and set him on my people and yours alike. I spoke to it. I felt its hatred. How many of your kind did it kill over the millennia? More than I ever did.'

'You cannot twist this. You are Níðhöggr – bent on murder and suffering.'

'So are you,' roared Cú Roí. 'You and that horror you carry. You are no better than me.'

'Maybe not. But when I take your head, I know this world will be a better place.'

'Liar! Hypocrite! You care nothing for this world or its people. Leave it to me and you can keep your Tower. I will let you be. I will even allow you to hunt here, should you choose. The war between the Therians and The Towers could end now. I will crush the human cities. I will destroy their technology. I will rip up their roads. The magic will return to this land.'

'No!'

'Why not?' Cú Roí hissed back. 'Why not? I offer you and The Towers a future. Why do you so desperately want to kill me? Why? I offer you peace and you refuse. Why do you want to kill me?'

'Because I cannot die unless you do!' Grímnir screamed.

'Yes. That was the truth. When I die, you will die. We are different, after all. I fight so hard to survive, and you fight only to ... cease. An immortal who wishes for death. An immortal who would doom his entire race for these insects. It is abhorrent.'

With a shout, Grímnir charged towards the giant.

ROWAN

ROWAN PUSHED THE TWO PERSONAL RESCUE DEVICES UP ONTO THE ROOF WITH A grunt, then pulled himself up after them. He spun and slammed the hatch down. The locking mechanism was gone, melted away when Cam had burned it open.

Turning, Rowan saw the Maiden sitting next to Cam. The young Elf lay unconscious. Fires raged everywhere. The roof was blistered and soft underneath his feet. Rowan ran over and dropped the red boxes. His left hand throbbed – he had burned it somewhere below. He couldn't remember where. The adrenaline was starting to wear off, and a whole chorus of minor aches and pains, and cuts and bruises were starting to sing. Ignoring them, he reached past the Maiden to check Cam's pulse. He couldn't find it, but he wasn't sure what that meant in an Elf. His leg was a mess; the makeshift bandage had soaked right through, and a puddle of blood rippled around him. Rowan had seen a lot of injuries in his time, and he worried that Cam had bled out.

'He's alive,' the Maiden said. 'Just.' She reached out and took one of Cam's hands. She held it gently, pressed between her own.

'We've got to get him up. There are Barghest down there. It won't take them long to work out where we are, and that hatch doesn't lock. We need to get down off this roof.' Once, twice, three times Rowan slapped Cam across his scarred cheeks. The Elf groaned feebly and tried to bat his hands away. Encouraged, Rowan began shaking him, jolting his head back and forth. His long blond hair whipped and tumbled around his face.

'Wake up!' he shouted into the prostrate Elf's ear.

'No ...' Cam said. It was followed by a string of gibberish.

'God damn it, Cam, wake up. Barghest. Lots of Barghest! Wake up!'

'Father?' Cam muttered. His eyes finally flickered open. 'What's going on? Ow, my head. Have I been drinking?'

'No, you dumb bastard, we've got to go. Get up. Get up!'

Behind Rowan, the hatch slammed open with a clang. A probing mound of pink tentacles spilled onto the roof. 'Oh shit,' Rowan said. 'Oh shit. Look. Over there. They're here. We're dead.'

Before the Barghest could pull itself onto the roof, the Maiden raised her hands. The earth that had collapsed onto the roof with the Lamborghini bunched

up in a solid six-foot wall. It teetered like the crest of a wave and then slammed down into the hatch. A mass of debris pushed the emerging Barghest back down the hole and blocked it. 'They will not be held for long,' she said.

Cam tried to pull himself up, but his leg collapsed, and he screamed. Rowan lifted him to his feet and held him there. The Elf swayed and blinked. 'I ... I can't see.'

Rowan looked into the Elf's eyes: they were dilated and unfocussed. He was going into shock. 'I can't see,' Cam sobbed. 'Everything's gone blurry.'

The Maiden took Cam's hand. 'Hush, Camhlaidh. It will pass.' His breathing slowed and he smiled at the Maiden. 'I'm sorry. I feel better now.'

She returned his smile and then turned to Rowan. 'I hope you have a plan,' she said to him.

'Sort of.' He quickly explained what the personal rescue devices were.

'So,' Cam said weakly, 'you want us to abseil five hundred feet down the side of a burning building on a piece of string, whilst a bunch of Barghest do their best to chew through said string?'

'It's high tensile steel.'

'Oh well, in that case, I'm sure we'll be fine,' Cam grumbled.

'Look,' Rowan said, exasperated, 'compared to some of the crazy shit you've come up with, this is pure A-grade Hannibal Smith.'

'More like Wile E. Coyote if you ask me.'

'Do you have a better idea?' Rowan snapped. 'You wouldn't believe what I had to go through to get hold of them!'

'There are only two of them,' the Maiden interjected.

'That is another small issue ...' Rowan began before trailing off. 'Can't you fly or something?'

'No,' the Maiden said, staring at him with clear green eyes.

'Oh.' The west side of the roof erupted into flames that shot twenty feet in the air. Rowan shied away from the heat. With a groan, that part of the roof gave way and collapsed into the apartment below. 'You two go down, then I'll pull one of the cables up and come down after you.'

'You'll get eaten before that,' Cam said. 'Look.' Pink tendrils had forced

themselves through the rubble blocking the hatch. As they watched, the mound covering it went down a few inches. ‘They’re pulling it out from below.’

‘I’m glad you’ve got your vision back.’

‘If the Barghest don’t get you, the fire will,’ Cam said. ‘I don’t think the fire will hurt me though. Not now.’ He lifted a tattooed arm in explanation.

‘It doesn’t make you monster-proof,’ Rowan argued.

‘What do you propose, Camhlaidh?’ the Maiden asked gently.

‘You two get out of here and I’ll hold them off.’

‘You’ll die,’ Rowan said, appalled.

‘You don’t know that.’

‘What? Of course I ... that’s a stupid argument!’

‘Look, I’m the only living flamethrower here. I’m the only one who can do this. Get me closer to the hatch.’

Rowan helped Cam hobble back to the centre of the roof, nearer to the hatch. The rubble had dropped another foot, and barbed tentacles were industriously pulling more down.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Rowan said desperately. ‘There’s got to be another way.’

‘There isn’t.’ Cam smiled at him. ‘My leg’s useless. My vision’s in and out. I feel light-headed. I’m dying, Rowan. Even if you could get me into one of those harnesses, I’d probably pass out before I got to the bottom. Let me do this.’

‘Jesus, Cam. Fuck.’

‘It’s okay. Besides,’ he said with a grin, ‘look at those ridiculous rescue things. I’ve probably got a better chance than you do.’

GRÍMNIR

CÚ ROÍ REARED UP AND HIS BODY SWELLED AND DISTORTED. HE GREW TALLER,

his face elongated, and twin horns sprouted from his brows. A creature like a baby tyrannosaur, halfway between man and dragon, reared over Grímnir. Its head came down and butted him. Dagger-shaped teeth scored his chest.

The Jötnar ignored the pain and whipped Camulus around in a flat arc. A thick scaled arm blocked his. Grímnir ducked and spun under a bicep thicker than his thigh. He slipped behind Cú Roí and saw great gashes in the giant's back, wormy wingtips jerking in the pulp. In the split-second it took Cú Roí to spin around and slam an open palm into the side of Grímnir's head, he saw them grow bigger.

Grímnir was catapulted from his feet and spun a somersault in the air before landing on his back on a piece of upturned steel. Rebar impaled Grímnir through his gut. Camulus spun from his hand and clattered towards Cú Roí. The monster kicked it away with a horned foot and advanced on Grímnir.

Grímnir struggled to pull himself free, but before he could, Cú Roí reached him. The monster stamped on his face, driving his head back onto broken concrete. Grímnir felt the back of his skull cave in. For a moment, his consciousness wavered. Cú Roí clenched both giant hands above its head, then brought them down onto Grímnir's chest. They hit him like a cannonball. His ribs crushed into his lungs, and blood fountained out of his mouth.

Cú Roí hit him again and again, breaking the tattooed man against the rubble on the roof of the annexe.

ROWAN

‘THEY’RE SET,’ ROWAN SAID, CROUCHING BESIDE CAM. HE WAS HOLDING THE Immortals’ Requiem in his hands. ‘She wants to go down the south side, which isn’t ideal, but ... well ...’ he trailed off.

‘Well,’ Cam said heavily.

‘Look, I just wanted to say thank you. For doing this, I mean. It’s really ... it’s ... well, thanks. You know?’

‘I know.’

‘It’s been an honour, Cam. It really has.’

‘Oh Christ, not you too.’

‘What?’

‘This *Lord of the Rings* bollocks.’

‘This is Marine bollocks. You’re a brave man, Cam. Brave and true. It was an honour to stand beside you.’

‘Do you know something?’ Cam asked whimsically, closing his eyes. ‘It’s strange, but I’ve lived more in the last five days than I ever have before. It’s not necessarily been very good living, but living all the same. I should have had eternity, Rowan, but I don’t regret a thing. Five days of life. I feel like I’ve accomplished something. For the first time, I feel like I matter.’

‘You matter to me.’ Cam went quiet. Rowan watched the hatch. More tentacles had pushed their way through, and they were slowly clearing the way up onto the roof. In a minute or two the Barghest would break through.

‘I’m sorry about what happened to your sister, mate,’ Cam said.

‘So am I. I’m sorry about your dad.’ There was a long, sad pause. ‘I’m not sure if what you’re doing here is any more of a sacrifice because you’re immortal or not. But I’ll remember you, okay? I’ll remember everything, and I’ll tell any bastard who’ll listen about you. I will. That’s a kind of immortality, too. The best most of us can hope for.’

‘Fucking hell, Rowan. Don’t worry about it. Who wants to live forever anyway, right?’ Cam opened his eyes and smiled. He raised his arm. The dragon tattoo sparkled in the eerie light. Rowan gripped it. They clasped each other wrist to wrist. Like warriors.

Camhlaidh

ROWAN STEPPED AWAY AND THE MAIDEN CAME TO CAM. SHE KNELT BY HIM AND held his hand again. He smiled up at her and she smiled back.

‘You would have been a fine Satyr, Camhlaidh,’ she said. ‘I think I would have enjoyed the years by your side.’

‘Go on, get out of here.’ She kissed him on the brow and walked away. He didn’t watch them go over the side. He watched the hatch. He had no idea how long it would take them to get down the side of the building. In many respects, he didn’t care.

Oh, he hoped they would make it safely, but he knew there was nothing he could do to help them with that. He had one purpose. He had to step into the breach. He smiled ruefully.

There wasn’t much left of the roof now. The fires had spread across the flat surface. Skylights had burst open. Air ducts had sagged into molten slag. Flames consumed everything, and smoke choked the air.

He was going to die here. He thought that he might be immune to fire – the beating heat didn’t hurt him anything like it should. Then again, that might just be shock and blood loss, with some fatigue poisons thrown in for good measure. It didn’t really matter. When the roof gave in, and sizeable portions of it already had, he would fall to his death. Or he would be crushed to death. Or the Barghest would eat him. He was going to die.

ROWAN

THE PERSONAL RESCUE DEVICES WOULD LOWER THEM AT EXACTLY SIX FEET PER

second. It would take ninety seconds to get down the side of the Beetham Tower. Rowan paused at the edge of the roof, hanging over nothing, preparing to begin the descent. Below them was a gauntlet of smoke and fire. Rowan's attention was elsewhere. Night had nearly fallen, but between what was left of the day and the raging fires, there was enough light for him to watch helplessly as Cú Roí transformed into something halfway between humanoid and dragon.

The Maiden waited next to Rowan. She had climbed into the harness without complaint and climbed over the side of the roof without any sign of fear. Rowan was impressed, despite himself.

'He's going to finish changing into a dragon soon,' he shouted at her.

'I can see that,' the Maiden replied, her voice was calm.

'Can't you do something?'

'Maybe. When we get down.'

'What if he flies away?'

'It will be very difficult to defeat him.'

'Great.'

'I think he is preoccupied. Look.'

Rowan watched as the demonic creature began to pummel something on the roof next to it. 'What is that?'

'It is Grímnir,' the Maiden said.

'Oh my God,' Rowan said. The big man must be going through hell.

GRÍMNIR

THE PULVERISING BEATING STOPPED. THE MONSTER STEPPED BACK.

You are beaten, zealot. You were never good enough for this. It is a tangled web between us. You want to kill me so that you may die, but you have not the skill. I want to kill you but can't, because you are unkillable whilst I live. What

shall we do?

'Give me Camulus back and stand still for a moment, and I will show you.'

A joke? This new world has softened you, zealot. Two giant wings unfurled from Cú Roí's back. Grímnir watched the giant flap them experimentally.

It is time I left. My pledge remains. Your defeat does not change anything. I will raze the cities and bring this world to heel. I will give The Towers what they desire the most. I will return the magic, and you will recognise me as the saviour I have always been. The Miracle Child. You will soon see that I offer life to all races. I offer you a future. You may even find happiness in your failure. You will see.

'Never,' Grímnir spat.

Goodbye, zealot. Cú Roí continued the change from demon to dragon.

Camhlaidh

THE FIRST BARGHEST ERUPTED ONTO THE ROOF. ITS MEDUSA'S HALO OF writhing tentacles spun around it and it shrieked. Cam brought up the dragon mouth palm and seared the thing from existence. A second Barghest went the same way, and a third, but the fourth managed to scamper behind the burning mass of the crane and the upended Lamborghini. He noticed morbidly that there was a human hand poking out from beneath the wreck, and absently wondered who the poor bastard had been – some rich kid, probably.

He pointed his hand at the car and hesitated. It was an amazing car. A masterpiece of the automotive industry. It seemed sacrilegious to do anything more to it. He shook his head. He was being stupid – it was already a write-off; nothing more than an expensive coffin. Dragon fire tore it in half. The body inside was set aflame. He couldn't see the Barghest ... was it dead? He didn't get time to make sure; a fifth appeared at the hatch, and then a sixth ... Cam burned

them to ash.

Then there were no more. His vision swam. He tried to stand up but collapsed back with a groan. The wound in his thigh opened up again, and blood ran down his jeans and began to hiss on the roof. Maybe he was fireproof. The thought made him giggle.

He closed his eyes. For a few moments, he felt peace. He had run from death for so long. It wasn't so bad. At least his leg had stopped hurting. That was almost certainly a bad sign. God, he thought, what a fuck-up. The whole thing had been botched from start to finish. He realised, with a laugh, that stupidity existed within everybody, regardless of age or genus.

He began to hum that Queen song – ‘Who Wants To Live Forever’. Something snorted in his ear in reply.

GRÍMNIR

IT HURTS. CHANGING. BECOMING. BUT PAIN IS LIFE AND LIFE IS PAIN. I AM SURE you agree? After all, that must hurt.

The giant was right. Grímnir was in pain. He couldn't move his legs. The jagged piece of metal sticking through him had severed his spine. Unless he pulled himself off it, his body could not heal.

Cú Roí's body was elongating. Grímnir could see bones shifting and sliding beneath skin that was thickening and taking on an iridescent shimmer in the weak light. Every few seconds, a gunshot crack echoed off the Beetham Tower as something inside the monster snapped. Each time, Cú Roí grunted and its massive body went into brief spasm.

A long whipping tail spun out from the base of its spine like pulled taffy, and Cú Roí fell to its hands and feet. Arms and legs bent and became massive. The dragon reared onto its hind legs and unfurled its great wings to their full length.

It looked up to the brooding night sky and a blossom of fire spilled from its nose and lips. It was an impressive sight.

Grímnir had seen two specks descending the side of the Beetham Tower just before those vast wings blocked his line of sight. They were coming down quickly. He tried to push himself off the steel shard. The dragon's great equine head swung back around towards him. *Stay there, zealot.* The serpentine tail came around in a flat swipe. The barb at its end clipped the side of Grímnir's temple, and he fell back, stunned, onto the impaling metal.

The huge monster surged forwards. Two mattress-sized feet crushed Grímnir back onto the roof. For a moment, there was nothing but cold smooth scale and a faint smell of sulphur. Grímnir couldn't breathe. His ribs collapsed into his lungs. His heart stopped.

The weight lifted and Grímnir groaned. He was broken again. His bones fused back together misaligned and crooked.

Yield to me. Yield to me, and I will stop the pain.

'No,' Grímnir gasped with the first breath of his inflating lungs. The dragon reared up again. Both its front feet came down like an avalanche to smother him again. This time, a sword-length talon drove through his throat. The weight of the dragon pulped his legs and waist. Grímnir choked on his own blood. Cú Roí pulled the sharp claw out slowly.

Yield. Swear fealty. You will stand only second to me. You will have power. An eternity of anything you could ever want. All you have to do is ... surrender.

'No.'

The dragon stamped on him again. The rebar twisted and bent and ripped out of his side. A coil of intestines slopped to the roof, but he was free.

These humans are nothing. They are weak and self-obsessed. I have examined them. There is nothing in them but petty fear and jealousy. They are worthless. Rule them with me.

'Like Leach? Never. I will never kneel to you.'

Then you will suffer. I will bury you in a hole and I will leave you there. I cannot kill you, zealot. But I know how fragile the mind is. I will break you. I will turn you into a gibbering shadow. A ghost. I will destroy you. The barbed tail

slammed into his forehead and Grímnir's world turned white.

Camhlaidh

IT WAS A PARTICULARLY BIG BARGHEST. ITS WIDE CIRCULAR MOUTH WAS practically touching his ear. An acrid smell wafted from it. Hundreds of tentacles weaved through the space above Cam's face.

'Missed you, did I, you horrible cock-womble?' he asked tiredly. Nothing hurt anymore. He felt cold, despite the seven-foot-high flames that encircled them. What was left of the roof around him was bulging strangely, and fine plumes of smoke twirled and spiralled through microscopic holes. Elsewhere, long rents spat ash up from glowing depths. A few of them had cut to within half a foot of where he lay. The roof was angled drunkenly. The whole thing was only a hair's breadth from collapse.

There was so much smoke billowing from the various conflagrations that it formed a low roof, nine or ten feet above him. It was a swirling inky mass. Cam thought he could see forms in it – the flitting faces of the dead. He sighed and closed his eyes. He didn't want to see that.

'I think we're both fucked, don't you?' He turned to face the mottled pink monster and opened his eyes again. It looked slightly charred. He lifted his hand and pointed it at the thing's mouth. He felt the heat somewhere in his shoulder, building, creeping up his arm, waiting to be unleashed.

The Barghest slumped to the roof next to him. Its tentacles pooled around it. A couple touched his bleeding leg. It whined gently, and Cam lowered his hand. The fire within him died away, but the flames around him only grew.

Cam closed his eyes again. 'I suppose you're right. Nobody wants to die alone, do they?' he said to the Barghest. 'It doesn't mean I like you though.'

The Barghest hissed. 'You're brighter than you look, aren't you?' There was

a groan and a crack, and two of the rifts zig-zagged forwards. The roof beneath Cam and the Barghest tilted, and a wash of flame blazed up around the cracks. The Barghest screamed.

‘Oh, be quiet, you big baby,’ Cam admonished. ‘God, I hate you.’ It hissed again, but it stopped screeching. It laid its big blind bullet head on his injured thigh. He looked at it and sighed but didn’t try to move it off him. ‘I wish I had something to drink,’ Cam said.

GRÍMNIR

CÚ ROÍ WAS PLAYING WITH HIM. THE DRAGON HIT HIM AND THEN STEPPED BACK, watching. Every time Grímnir got to his feet it slammed him down again. Grímnir stoically fought on, trying to get to Camulus, which was torturously close. It was futile. For all his strength, the dragon was just too big and too fast. Grímnir persisted. He had faith in the Maiden. She would not let him down.

His body was a hunched mess. His pelvis was crooked, and his spine was kinked. The ribs on his right side were concave and breathing was difficult. His vision was blurred and sickening – Grímnir suspected that his head had been flattened and his eyes were now unevenly spaced. His left leg was a fused clubbed mass of bone that wouldn’t bend at the knee. His right arm was twisted almost like a corkscrew and attached to a humped and lumpy shoulder.

Grímnir ducked inelegantly beneath a blast of the dragon’s fire, straight into the thick trunk of its lashing tail. The wind was knocked from him, and he slid backwards across the roof. Glass and chunks of concrete skinned the flesh from his back.

The big man lay there, panting. A series of heavy crunching footsteps and the dragon loomed over him. Its long face peered at him, its wide mouth slightly upturned at the corners as if it were smiling at him. He felt around for

something, anything, to stab into one of those glittering eyes. There was nothing to hand.

It gives me great satisfaction to see you like this. My nemesis. My hunter. I wonder why I was ever so concerned about you. Look at you. You are a shambling ruin. You are nothing. The irony that I shall torment you forever because of the magic you have used to stalk me is ... exquisite.

The dragon stepped away from him. Grímnir forced himself to sit up. Cú Roí flared its wings out to either side. *I have a world to conquer, zealot, but when I am finished, I will come looking for you. Run and hide. When I find you, I will hurt you, and when I am bored ... I will let you go. Run and hide, run and hide. You will be my plaything for eternity.*

Both wings swept down and a blast of wind washed over Grímnir. The dragon lifted a few feet off the roof. Another beat of its wings and it rose another ten feet. The roof shook with a rumble, and Cú Roí's giant head turned on its snaking neck to look behind it.

Something loomed above them. It was approximately the size of a lorry, and roughly the shape of a fist. Twenty-foot-long fingers opened. Before the dragon could react, the stone hand swatted it like a fly.

ROWAN

‘IT’S GOING TO FLY AWAY,’ ROWAN SAID. HE POINTED THE TIP OF THE Immortals’ Requiem at the dragon. ‘I told you.’

The journey down the side of the Beetham Tower had been perilous. The personal rescue devices were remarkably efficient. Rowan and the Maiden sat in their harnesses, and the two units had lowered them at a steady rate. The danger came from the fires that burned everywhere. On three occasions, windows above

them exploded outwards and glass rained down on top of them.

Rowan's left shoulder bled from a deep gash, and the Maiden's face was covered in blood from a split scalp. The superheated glass and steel had been almost unbearable. Hot choking smoke issued from broken windows. Fire crawled up the walls all around them, and it was only through happenstance that the personal rescue devices didn't drop them straight through one of those vertical furnaces. Rowan's eyebrows were crisp, and he felt like he had a bad sunburn. They had been lucky.

They had descended onto the part of the building that linked the hotel lobby to the annexe. The roof of this narrow slice was a storey below the roof of the annexe. Rowan and the Maiden had left their harnesses and climbed up a safety ladder onto the annexe roof. Then they had crept to the western side of the roof and taken shelter behind some air-conditioning vents. The dragon hadn't noticed them – it had been batting Grímnir around like a cat playing with a toy mouse, but now it looked like it was going to leave. Rowan clutched his burned hand to his chest. 'It's in the air – do something!' he said.

'Quiet,' the Maiden snapped. She closed her eyes. Calmly speaking to herself, she continued, 'Fire, Water, and Air are the most feared elements. Fire burns, Water drowns, and Air can rip and tear even the most solid edifice away. Nobody thinks much about Earth. But Earth ... Earth is the true destroyer. An earthquake can raze an entire city. I am stronger here, closer to the Earth. It is intractable. It is eternal. Earth can ...'

The Maiden raised her right hand above her head. There was a rumble, and the building beneath him shook. He looked to his right, over the edge of the annexe, and down to the road three storeys below. It was confusing in the gloom, but it looked as if the tarmac rolled like liquid. Concentric rings rippled, as if somebody had thrown a gigantic pebble into a solid pond. Except they were flowing the wrong way, towards the centre of the disturbance.

The ground erupted, and mud piled up into the air. The column grew and grew until it towered over Rowan.

There was a pause. The Maiden splayed her fingers, and Rowan watched, amazed, as a gigantic hand appeared from the mass. It had taken less than a

second. He blinked. The Maiden brought her hand sharply down.

The gigantic hand of Earth mimicked her, and the flat of its palm came down on top of the dragon and slammed it back onto the roof. The Maiden opened her eyes and nodded with satisfaction. She smiled at Rowan and dropped her hand to her side. Rowan looked back at the mud hand. Only, it wasn't mud anymore. Now it was rock: an inanimate sculpture. The fingers formed the bars of a huge cage. Two wings thrashed out of either side.

'Earth can do ...' she began, then her legs gave way. Rowan dropped the Immortals' Requiem and caught her, lowering her to the floor. 'I am okay,' she said. 'I am just tired. I will be fine. Go and help Grímnir. I cannot do any more now. Go. Go now!'

Rowan scooped up the black sword and ran. Grímnir was on his feet. He was naked for some reason, and he looked like Quasimodo.

'Holy fuck,' Rowan whispered when he saw the ruin of the big man's body. 'You must be in agony,' he said. Grímnir ignored him. Instead, he limped straight to Camulus, his upper body rolling like a sailor at sea, and picked it up with his left hand. His right arm looked useless. He turned and looked at Rowan. 'Camhlaidh?' the big man asked.

Rowan wanted to tell Grímnir about their friend's bravery, but they didn't speak the same language. Instead, he pointed at the top of the Beetham Tower. It was wreathed in thick black smoke that climbed up and up into the dim sky. Rowan shook his head.

Remarkably, Grímnir's reply was in English. 'Fuck,' he grunted. Grímnir turned back to the stone cage. His face was flat and hard. Rowan stood beside him, and the two swordsmen watched as the dragon's wings rapidly shrunk away.

©amhlaidh

THE FIRES WERE UPON THEM. THE BARGHEST'S HEAD STEAMED AS ITS SLIME broiled away. The tiles creaked and cracked all around him. The roof beneath Cam lurched. A crack appeared next to them, and fire rippled out of it. The Barghest whined.

Cam thought he understood why the creature had settled down beside him instead of trying to rip his spleen out through his ears. It was scared. So was Cam. He realised now that when the Grim Reaper ushers you towards the final exit, it doesn't matter who or what you are, whether man, god or monster; all you really want is one last hug. He put a comforting hand on the Barghest's head. It was sticky, and his skin began to sting.

The roof tilted violently, and a chasm opened beneath them. The Barghest slid away from him. Cam reached out instinctively to try and catch it. Then he was sliding too, and he grabbed at the edge of a broken piece of concrete instead. The roof beneath him turned and crumbled into hunks of debris that disappeared into a boiling mess of fire and churning smoke.

Cam dangled over the fiery pit and watched the Barghest plummet towards the inferno. It didn't make a sound. Its tentacles spread out around it as it fell. It seemed to take a long time. 'Good riddance, you slimy freak,' Cam said when it disappeared into the molten hell below him. His heart wasn't in it though. In fact, he felt a bit sad. He supposed there was camaraderie in a shared death.

The top few floors of the building had been gutted. The lake of fire looked a long way down. The skeletal remnants of five or six floors jutted out from the walls on either side. Here, he could see a burning sofa; there, a charred corpse. Below him though, there was only the drop into oblivion. Cam supposed he might survive the fire. Who knew how the dragon on his arm had changed him? He would not survive the fall.

Cam hung there. He couldn't bring himself to let go. 'I don't want to die,' he whispered. Then his tired fingers slipped, and his body tipped into the abyss. Cam closed his eyes, folded his arms across his chest, and fell. His final thoughts were of his father. He thought Manannán would have been proud of him at the end. He hoped so.

ROWAN

CÚ ROÍ WAS A DEMON, ROWAN THOUGHT. THE THING HE HAD BECOME WAS somewhere between a dragon and a man. It was huge and red, with a long snout and curved horns. It ducked from out of the stone hand and growled at Rowan and Grímnir.

Dusk had turned to night. The roof was lit by the huge flaming building behind them. Everything was shadow and false light. Rowan clutched the hilt of the Immortals' Requiem in a sweaty palm. His shoulder hurt. His burned hand hurt. 'Well,' he said to the damaged Jötnar beside him. 'This is it. Good luck.' The huge hand at the end of Grímnir's broken right arm clapped him on his injured shoulder and nearly sent him to his knees. 'Arghh, shit. Thanks, I suppose.'

Grímnir looked at him solemnly and nodded. 'You are masochistic twatscicle,' he said in heavily accented pidgin English.

'I'm sorry, what?' Rowan demanded incredulously, but the big man had already set off towards Cú Roí at a lurching trot that turned into a disjointed run, which ended in a clumsy, wildly lumbering sprint.

Grímnir swung Camulus as he ran and Cú Roí darted back out of his way, deceptively quick for its bulk. It swung a huge fist back at the tattooed man. Grímnir raised his deformed right arm and blocked the crushing blow. Rowan heard it snap but Grímnir didn't miss a beat: he ducked and slashed again. The movement turned Cú Roí's back to Rowan, and he saw that wings were pushing out of its back.

Without thinking, Rowan ran up behind him and hacked at them. The Immortals' Requiem sang its banshee song. One wing fell to the floor where it writhed and jumped as if trying to fly away by itself. The other was still attached

to Cú Roí, but only by a thread of tissue.

The monster spun around with a shriek of outrage. Its talon-tipped fingers whipped towards him. Rowan stumbled backwards, raising the Immortals' Requiem to defend himself. The force of the blow snapped the sword. The top third whistled as it spun away into the night. The rest of the blade shivered so violently that it numbed Rowan's hand. He struggled to keep hold of it. Rowan took a step back. The demon followed, and panic sent shards of ice through Rowan's stomach.

Rowan saw Grímnir behind Cú Roí. The big man's broken face was set with concentration, and he was pushing and pulling savagely at his re-broken right arm. Rowan took another step, buying the big man some time. The demon stared at Rowan with mesmeric eyes.

Now you die, an awful voice hammered into Rowan's head.

'You killed my sister,' the marine spat.

Grímnir charged in, Camulus once again held in his right hand. He came quietly and lunged for the monster's broad back. Somehow the demon anticipated the move and one big hand caught the tattooed man's sword arm before he could drive Camulus home. Seemingly without effort, Cú Roí lifted Grímnir by the wrist until he was dangling in the air. The monster turned back to Rowan.

I have killed many sisters, little human. I will kill many more. Unwatched, Grímnir reached up and took Camulus from his right hand. Holding it with his left, he sliced it down into Cú Roí's wrist, and the monster roared in pain as its hand was cut from its arm. The tattooed man dropped to the floor lightly. Blood poured from Cú Roí's arm. Grímnir hacked at the monster again, and it backed away and pointed its stump at him. Gouts of thick steaming blood hit Grímnir in the face and he reeled backwards. The skin around his eyes and cheeks sloughed away, and he wheeled around blindly.

The creature laughed, its voice deep and grating. All the fury Rowan felt over the death of his sister flowed through him. Cú Roí had its back to him. Rowan ran at it as fast as he could. The remains of two wings twitched, raw and bleeding, in its ruined flesh.

Jumping up, Rowan screamed with hatred and slammed the jagged stump of the black sword between Cú Roí's shoulder blades. The monster spun around. The movement caused Rowan to fly from the creature's back, the black sword left embedded in it. He landed with a bone-jarring thud, and the wind rushed from his lungs. His vision faded for a moment.

He shook it off to find the monster bearing down on him. Cú Roí's face screwed up in a snarl that displayed the razor-wire tangle of its teeth.

GRÍMNIR

GRÍMNIR'S SIGHT RETURNED QUICKLY. THE DEMON'S BOILING BLOOD HAD cooled, and his injuries had healed. The human had done well. Grímnir had expected him to run. Instead, he had stood beside him and faced the dragon. He truly was a brave and honoured friend. Cú Roí stalked towards the little man. Grímnir hefted Camulus in his right hand. The monster had his back to him: the hilt of the black sword stuck out from between its shoulders.

Grímnir shambled up behind Cú Roí. His badly set bones stuck out oddly, making him misshapen and throwing out his balance, but he had to take every advantage he could get. He hobbled as silently as he could to stab his enemy in the back.

Even so, the dragon realised something was wrong in the last instant – maybe it remembered Grímnir was behind him. Perhaps it just heard his clumsy feet as they pounded across the glass-strewn roof. Whatever the reason, Cú Roí spun and tried to grab Grímnir. If its hand hadn't been cut away, it would have succeeded.

Instead, its stump, with the bud of a hand beginning to regenerate from the end, glanced off the side of Grímnir's jaw. The tattooed man slammed Camulus into Cú Roí's chest with all the force that his broken body could muster.

ROWAN

FOR A MOMENT, THERE WAS SILENCE EXCEPT FOR THE WAIL OF DISTANT CAR alarms. Even those seemed to fade away. Cú Roí and Grímnir stood toe to toe. They were completely still. Then Grímnir cried out and his neck arched backwards. Rowan clambered to his feet and stepped over to help the big man. He stopped. Blue waves seemed to ripple over Grímnir's skin, starting at the hand gripping the sword. Rowan looked closer and saw his tattoos were writhing.

Slowly at first but then quicker, the tattoos slithered off his skin, along the blade of Camulus, and into Cú Roí. The demon's flesh slowly turned a pulsing red, and Camulus shattered. Grímnir fell limply to the roof, his once tattooed skin pale and unblemished. He lay in a boneless heap, and Rowan knew he was dead. The colour in Cú Roí's body leached away like pottery removed from a kiln. The Immortals' Requiem stood where Rowan had buried it between its shoulder blades. Rowan could hear the faint clicking of rapidly cooling stone. Everything was still. After the fury and terror of the last few minutes – the last few days – it seemed abnormal. Rowan took a deep breath. The air was thick with smoke, but it felt pure and fresh. He was alive. For a split-second, nothing else mattered.

Rowan stood and looked at the monster, unsure what to do next. He felt a gentle hand placed on his uninjured shoulder. The Maiden smiled at him, then walked over to Grímnir. She sat beside him and pulled his big shaggy head into her lap. She closed his staring eyes and then, for the longest time, she simply stroked his hair. Rowan slumped down next to her.

'What now?' he eventually asked. 'I mean, it is dead. Right?' The Maiden looked over at the petrified demon. Carefully, she laid Grímnir's head on the

roof. She folded his arms across his chest and then kissed his forehead. The Maiden stood up and walked over to Cú Roí. The Miracle Child was still standing; a grotesque statue with a twisted face, frozen in a wild rictus. The Maiden tapped Cú Roí's shoulder with a knuckle. It made a solid noise. She absently wiped her hand on her clothes. She examined the Immortals' Requiem, then took hold of the charred hilt.

'This is the song of your life,' she said quietly. Then she dragged the sword from the demon's back. The broken blade left a jagged hole that began to crumble around the edges. Soon, an avalanche rippled through the statue, and the torso folded in half with a whispering sound.

When the top half hit the roof, it became nothing but dust, like a dry sandcastle that had been kicked over. The legs and hips stayed upright for a moment, and then they, too, crumbled. The wind picked up the remains of the dragon and sent them spilling out into the night sky, to be dispersed across the city it had destroyed.

THE FRONT DOOR OF THE GREEN MAN PUB WAS LOCKED. IT WAS THE FIRST BAR they found that wasn't on fire. Rowan banged on the door.

'Who is it?' a deep female voice shouted.

'We're human. We're hurt. Please let us in. We need somewhere to rest.'

'We're shut,' the female voice said. 'On account of the apocalypse.'

'It's over now, except for the fires. I think whoever's in charge can handle that.'

'Nope – there're monsters out there.'

The Maiden's green eyes turned on the door. 'Let us in,' she said softly.

'Okay, hang on.'

The Maiden kept the Glamour up until they were inside, and the door was locked behind them. The landlady was a huge woman. She started when she saw them, but she seemed to regain her composure quickly enough.

'Did I let you in? Well ... right.' She went behind the bar. 'Seeing as you're

here, what would you like to drink?’

‘Water, thank you,’ the Maiden said with a smile.

‘I’ll have a pint of lager,’ Rowan said wearily. ‘God help me, I think I need it.’ They sat down in a corner booth and Rowan put what was left of the Immortals’ Requiem on the table. The pub was a hovel.

‘So, what now?’ Rowan asked. His shoulder ached, and his left hand was discoloured and badly swollen.

‘I will return to The Tower,’ the Maiden said. ‘The truth needs to be told about The Transmogrification. We are still a dying race. They will need me. Both Towers will need me. I will have to find a new husband.’

‘Husband?’ Rowan asked confused.

‘The Tattooist – he was the Satyr of Fire and Air; the Erlking. My husband,’ the Maiden said. ‘I suppose I even loved him after a fashion, though it was a ceremonial union. Camhlaidh inherited the mantle when the Satyr transferred his power into him. The Satyr’s Seed. What was left of it, at least. The Tattooist never was as foresighted as me.’ She smiled fondly. ‘I think Camhlaidh would have been a good Satyr. It is usually true that those who shun power are those most fit to wield it. It is why you humans so often fail. But he is gone. So many lives lost.’

Rowan drank in maudlin silence. ‘What about the rest of those ... things?’ he asked eventually, more to change the subject than anything else.

‘The building they were in was an inferno. Most of the Barghest and those bitten will have perished. Some will have escaped, and the world will suffer werewolves and monsters for a while. Perhaps it will open the humans’ eyes. Perhaps it will not.’

Rowan absorbed the Maiden’s words. Then he raised his glass. ‘To absent friends,’ he said solemnly. ‘To Cam,’ he intoned. ‘To Jason, to Jim, to the Tattooist. Even to Sam, I suppose ... To my sister ...’ He went quiet.

‘To Marcus Aquila Romila,’ said the Maiden, ‘and to Grímnir Vafthrúdnir. Also called Michael. Also called George, Dragon Slayer.’

They clinked glasses and drank, each momentarily lost in their own thoughts. ‘What now for you, Rowan?’ asked the Maiden.

‘I’m going to go and get my sister’s body, I’m going to bury her, I’m going to get very, very drunk, and then I’m going to go away. It’s not like I can stay in England – Cam got me locked up for every firearms offence on the statute books. I escaped from police custody. I’m a fugitive.’

‘I am sorry for what you have lost in helping us,’ the Maiden said earnestly.

‘Me too,’ Rowan replied. ‘I left her,’ he said as tears welled up in his eyes. ‘Back in the garage, I left her with those things. I should have stayed ...’

EPILOGUE



ANNALISE

Red sunlight flooded the beach bar, and Annalise squirmed with pleasure in its fading heat. To her right, the sun was setting over a placid ocean that glittered prettily beneath its rays. The bar was not too crowded, but it would get busier. August was the tourist season for the hotels of the Dominican Republic.

It had taken her nearly six months to track her prey. She didn't regret it. Sitting with her quarry so close sent a tingle of anticipation down her spine. She liked the Dominican Republic: Haiti was just over the border, and the voodoo merchants over there almost expected people to turn up dead and partially devoured. Her feeding habits didn't raise any questions.

Looking furtively in the mirror behind the bar, Annalise examined the man she had travelled across the Atlantic to find. He hadn't recognised her yet. Perhaps he hadn't seen her. Perhaps he didn't remember her. He would.

He was stocky and healthy, bulging with muscle and virility. He wore a baggy blue shirt and a pair of long khaki shorts with flip-flops, and he looked quite ravishing. The cropped hair she remembered had grown out and curled in an unruly mess around his ears. His baby-blue eyes were still clear and beautiful above a broken nose, and his teeth still glittered metallically in the dying light.

Those eyes – the last time she had seen them they had been cold and dead, and they sent a thrill of fear rushing through her. She remembered his foot coming down mercilessly on her hand, and she remembered the fall through the air that seemed to last forever.

The agony of landing had nearly driven her mad. She pulled herself away to safety, there to lick her wounds and regenerate. Everything within her had liquefied or broken, and it took hours for the pain to finally go away. She would repay him for that.

‘You’re English, aren’t you?’ a voice asked from next to her. Annalise started. ‘Wow, you were miles away, weren’t you?’ The speaker was a young man, very handsome, English accent, expensive watch, obviously used to getting what he wanted. ‘You need some company.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘No, I don’t,’ Annalise said frostily. She turned her attention back to Rowan.

‘Come on ... let me get you a drink.’

Annalise turned back to him and smiled coldly. ‘Tequila slammers.’

The man grinned lecherously. ‘Coming right up.’ The drinks were ordered and swallowed. ‘You’re from Manchester, right? I’m good with accents. Another one?’ Annalise nodded. ‘What do you think about all that stuff that went on there? All those dead people?’

‘They say it was a terrorist attack. Chemical weapons followed by more conventional bombs.’ She shrugged. ‘What else?’

‘Come on, you don’t believe that crap, do you?’ he snorted.

‘What am I supposed to believe?’ she asked innocently.

‘It’s a conspiracy. Those dead people were all mutilated. People who survived it have gagging orders against them. They say there was something flying around, destroying buildings. The government is covering something up.’ He paused.

‘Go on,’ Annalise said.

‘Aliens,’ the man said sincerely. ‘It’s got to be.’

‘Aliens,’ she repeated. ‘UFOs?’

‘Well, it’s better than chemical weapons.’

‘It’s a theory.’

‘Hell, I’ve got loads. Why don’t we go for a walk along the beach? Enjoy the sunset.’

‘I’m waiting for someone.’

‘Oh yeah, who?’ he asked, obviously used to hearing the line.

‘The man sat over there.’

Her admirer examined Rowan for a moment. ‘What is he, your boyfriend?’

‘No, he doesn’t even know I’m here yet. It’s a surprise.’

‘You’re a bit of a man-eater, aren’t you?’ he asked, his eyes gleaming with lust.

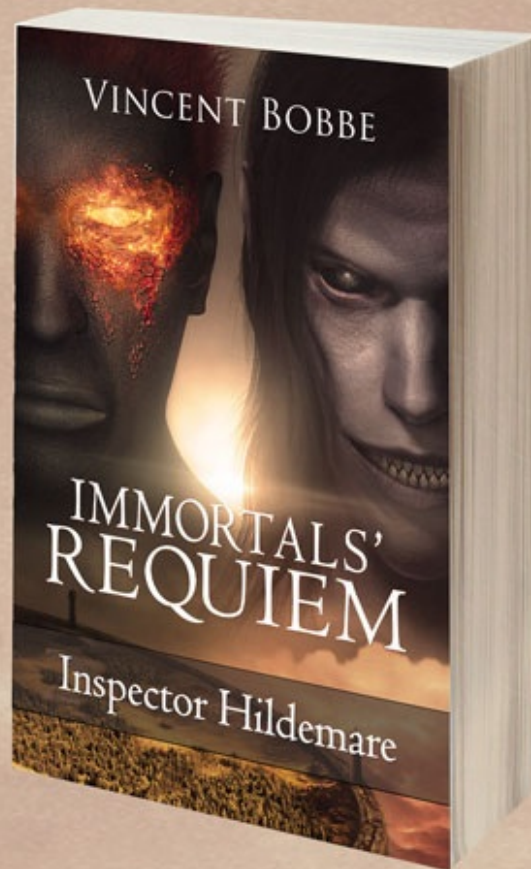
Annalise swallowed her second slammer and banged the empty glass down on the bar. ‘You have no idea,’ she said with a wicked smile.

END

Wondering what the police were up to through all of that? An entire character got cut during the editing process to keep the word count down, but I don’t want all that effort to go to waste ... turn the page to get a free novella set in the world of Immortals’ Requiem.

- VB

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DETECTIVE INSPECTOR HILDEMERE IS HAVING QUITE POSSIBLY THE WORST WEEK OF HIS LIFE. AS CÚ ROÍ AND LEACH BUTCHER THEIR WAY ACROSS MANCHESTER DURING THE EVENTS OF IMMORTALS' REQUIEM, FOLLOW THE POOR BUGGER GIVEN THE TASK OF INVESTIGATING THE GRUESOME MURDER SCENES THEY LEAVE IN THEIR WAKE!

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GLOSSARY OF CHARACTERS



This glossary compiles the names of the novel's characters with a brief description of their roles.

THE HUMANS

ADRIAN MATHERS: A PROFESSOR OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIOLOGY AT Manchester University, and a patron of the Green man public house.

ANNAEA: A ROMAN WHO LIVED CIRCA 82AD. THE WIFE OF MARCUS.

ANNALISE: A WORK COLLEAGUE OF SAM'S.

GALERIUS: A ROMAN WHO LIVED CIRCA 82AD. AN ACQUAINTANCE OF MARCUS.

JASON: EMPLOYEE OF MARK JONES. JASON ACTS AS MARK'S ANALYST, ADVISER,

and gopher and is the only person he has regular face-to-face contact with.

JESSICA HOMES: A POLICE CONSTABLE OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER POLICE.

JIM ZACHARIAS: AN EX-SOLDIER EMPLOYED BY JASON ON BEHALF OF MARK Jones to do surveillance on suspected fairies.

MARCUS AQUILA ROMILA: SEE MARK JONES.

MARK JONES: AN UNKILLABLE BUSINESS MAN AND FAIRY HUNTER.

OCTAVIUS: A ROMAN WHO LIVED CIRCA 82AD. A FRIEND TO MARCUS.

ROWAN: A ROYAL MARINE COMMANDO WHO HAS RETURNED TO HIS FAMILY HOME in Stockport, Greater Manchester, on annual leave.

SAMUEL “SAM” AUTUMN: A SOLICITOR WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN GREATER Manchester. Whilst walking through the City Centre, he is attacked by Cú Roí. He is the husband of Tabby and a colleague of Annalise.

SARAH: A PROSTITUTE WHO WORKS IN THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT NEAR TO Manchester Piccadilly train station.

SERGEI CONSTANTINE: A MERCENARY CONTRACTED BY MARK JONES. A Russian-born ex-KGB agent. Reputedly, Sergei has an almost psychotic resistance to fear.

TABITHA “TABBY” AUTUMN: SAM’S WIFE.

THE FAIRIES

CAMHLAIDH “CAM” Ó GRÍOBHTHA (KÆMHQ:LEID O: ʎI:VHQ:): A DRUNK AND a thief. He is a young Elf of the Seelie Court who has retreated to Earth to live out his remaining years.

CREACHMHAOIL (KʎÆKMAHEL): AN ANCIENT AND WISE ELF. A SENIOR MEMBER of the Seelie Court. In the absence of the Maiden, Creachmhaoil has assumed leadership. He is one of Cam’s old teachers.

CÚ ROÍ (KU: 'ʎI): THE MIRACLE CHILD. AN INCREDIBLY TALL THERIAN BEING hunted through time by Grímnir.

DAMBALLAH: THE PRINCE OF RATTLESNAKES. A SVARTÁLFAR OF THE UNSEELIE Court and the first hand of the Satyr of Fire and Air. In the absence of the Satyr, Damballah has assumed leadership. He is Leanan’s brother.

DOW SÉ MOCHAOMHOG (DAʃ SI: MKÆMH): A WARRIOR AND APPRENTICE TO

Manannán. An Elf of the Seelie Court who is active on Earth.

GRÍMNIR VAFTHRÚDNIR (ǪAMNE:'EΘ VAVΘǪUDINÐ.Θ): THE TATTOOED MAN. A Jötnar of the Seelie Court. His skin is etched with magic. He carries Camulus, a sword of power. His sole purpose is the destruction of the Therian, Cú Roí.

LEANAN: THE BAOBHAN SITH. THE PRINCESS OF DARKNESS. A SVARTÁLFAR OF the Unseelie Court and sister to Damballah.

MAIDEN OF EARTH AND WATER: AN ANCIENT MAGICAL ENTITY AND LEADER OF the Seelie Court who appears to be a young female Elf.

MANANNÁN Ó GRÍOBHTHA (MÆNÆNNAN O: ǪI:VHC:): A SENIOR ELF OF THE Seelie Court who lives in Manchester, England. Mentor to Dow and father to Cam.

MORGAN LEACH: A DISTURBING, SILENT THERIAN AND SERVANT OF CÚ ROÍ.

TATTOOED MAN: SEE GRÍMNIR.

TATTOOIST: A HUGE IFRIT OF THE UNSEELIE COURT. THE TATTOOIST IS A recluse who has not been seen or heard from in centuries.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent Bobbe is in his early forties. When he was about ten, he tripped on an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel and fell into his own brain. He's not quite managed to climb out yet, because the things that found him in there keep clawing him back in. He's happily married with two young children and lives in Manchester, England. His wife is horrifically allergic to pretty much everything, so he doesn't have any pets. This suits him.



ONE LAST THING ...

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On the other hand, if you're reading a paperback, and something greets you when you turn this page... run! :)

All the best,
Vincent Bobbe